

University of South Carolina Scholar Commons

Theses and Dissertations

2017

Stories: From Foreign to Fluent!

Kurt Hoberg

University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoberg, K.(2017). *Stories: From Foreign to Fluent!.* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4156>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Stories: From Foreign to Fluent!

by

Kurt Hoberg

Bachelor of Arts
Lehigh University, 2009

Bachelor of Science
Lehigh University, 2009

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2017

Accepted by:

Elise Blackwell, Director of Thesis

David Bajo, Reader

Caroline Nagel, Reader

Michael Dowdy, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Acknowledgements

I would like to give thanks, first, to my family for their support—my mother and father, especially. Thanks to Stephanie Watts for being my first fiction mentor and to Ed Whitley for picking me from the scrap heap. Also, thanks to James McAdams, whose edits and Seinfeld references were everything I could've hoped for. Thank you to the friends I met along the way, those creative forces of good in my confused early 20s: Mike McDade; C. Austin; Jim; Joe Fin; Martin; Michelle; the late Marie Bock; Joe Hinchcliffe; Camila; Pedro, the batman; and Zane. This collection of stories wouldn't be half as good if not for the great instruction of David Bajo and Elise Blackwell. Thank you both for pointing and letting me realize I shouldn't be staring at the finger. Thanks to my talented cohort, Tracie, Julia, and Sarah Jane, as well as the many writers at the University of South Carolina. I also couldn't have asked for a more compassionate group of housemates: Rebecca Landau, Victoria Chandler, and Caroline. Somebody loves you all back. Finally, my deepest thanks to Courtney. There's no telling what would've become of my soul and writing if you hadn't taken a chance on this Funhouse patron. Thank you for facilitating so much learning about the most important creative endeavor, relationships.

Abstract

These nine stories depict characters in migration and the consequences of that migration.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract.....	iii
From Foreign to Fluent!	1
The Vitamind Sessions	24
The Roadside Bar	41
C	59
Homestay	62
My Mother, <i>La Curandera</i>	79
This Ends with a Birthday	92
Mind Assured, Inc.	111
Nuevas Palmas, Pennsylvania.....	126

From Foreign to Fluent!

Bruce found Gari, the Writer/Director, in the classroom building. He was moving from one tiny desk to another, speaking into the earpiece, “Good?”

Gari waved Bruce in front of the whiteboard. “Then we’ll shine a small light at him from this wall,” he said and pointed to the back.

“Write something on the board, my brilliant teacher.”

Bruce chose a green marker from the rainbow selection on his desk.

I’m having doubts.

“Good, good.”

Gari nodded more passionately. He was sufficiently short to fit behind the desks, but his body seemed twisted and constrained there in the front row. Bruce wondered what made him seem unfitting—maybe his enthusiasm. The sparkly grey suit. He seemed like the aspirant screenwriter who runs off to Hollywood, except LA was a long way from Peru, and this a script-less reality TV show.

“How is my future celebrity?”

“I’m having doubts, Gari.”

“This is no time for doubts. The kids are getting bussed from their village this moment, and you have all you need for tomorrow’s first lesson. And the classroom—tell me it’s not amazing.”

One side of the room's yoke-colored walls was decorated in ABC's and numbers one through twenty. The other wall held portraits of Washington, Lincoln, Obama. These three were surrounded by magazine cut-outs or printed off photos of Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson moonwalking, SPAM, The Cat in the Hat, and the painting *Nighthawks*. Bruce's desk was wide and the drawers creaked and stuck authentically. The new Mac was connected to speakers and an expensive projector—not even his former English academy in Japan had provided that. The four neat rows of three desks promised the smallest class he'd ever taught in his three years' experience. Bookcases lined the back carpet, along with plastic bins filled with sharp and sticky implements for whatever creative project he could dream up for them.

"I can see it in your eyes. I did good. Everything is in your hands. You just need to stand where you are *and teach*." Gari balled a fist and growled the last two words.

"It is good," he admitted. His inventiveness had been discouraged by the money-driven Japanese academies, and the overly self-conscious Argentinian teens had chomped their gum at him. But for the next thirty days, he possessed infinite creative control over the 8-year olds, their supple brains. His classroom would be the center of their lives—not some internet game, not guilt-inducing parents, not math or science. This was the only way he would've accepted the challenge of the show: to transform the Quechua speaking kids into fluent speakers. Bruce had told himself the premise was no different than in any other language classroom, though there weren't cameras and a cameraman belching just outside the door.

"But I don't know if I'm a good enough teacher to do this."

Gari draped an arm around Bruce. They faced the empty classroom.

“When we interviewed, you remember what you said: you’re different from the others. You’re not a traveler who teaches English. Is that true?”

“It is.”

“That’s why I picked you. That’s why you’re my teacher, man. Look into that camera in the back and tell me how good you are.”

“I’m a good teacher.”

“With energy and to the mini-cam above the *N*.”

“I’m a good teacher.”

“Shout it at your first President.”

“I’m a damn good teacher.”

“Good with the volumes?” Gari asked, touching his earpiece. He nodded. “Now come, my brilliant teacher. I will show you your dormitory.”

Once outside the glass doors, Gari pointed to the four swings and jungle gym.

“You’re always going to have two cameramen here or in the students’ dormitory. Never in yours or the classroom.”

He shouted at the production hands chipping a soccer ball over the monkey bars.

“Lazy,” he muttered and gestured for Bruce to follow a concrete path lined with imported maples. Ahead was a barracks-style dorm for the students, erected on sandy ground. The selected location reminded Bruce of a miniaturized summer camp, which instead of a lake contained a concrete fountain, topped with a five-pointed star.

“Aren’t you worried that everything’s a little too dull?” he asked.

“Dull? It’s a campus, not a circus. What did you expect?”

“I don’t know. Most reality TV shows put people in expensive houses and fancy locations. The classroom’s nice but out here seems barren.”

Gari stopped and took Bruce by the shoulders, kneading like a cat. Staring at Gari, Bruce wondered if any skin color could hide bags under the eyes. He pointed beyond the tiny cabin ahead of them, at the haze of Lima to the north.

“My parents paid for me to go to school in the city, but I come from the same dirt-patches these kids are bussing from. I would not stand in these shoes, I would not have this conversation with you now if not for the things I learned in Lima. And honestly, I know that’s why the Producer picked me over more experienced men. So maybe I don’t have experience. So what. I have perspective, man. I won’t screw this. I won’t. But I need you. You know?”

Gari’s shoulders were trembling as he tried to maintain composure. Bruce felt chills and awkwardly hugged the short man, his neck bristling against Gari’s gelled hair.

“Do me a favor,” Gari said, pulling away. “Don’t get me involved when the cameras are rolling, okay? Viewers are turning on the TVs and see their favorite teacher and the cute little natives. They are going to learn from you, be inspired by you. Keep me out of it.”

Inside the private dormitory, there were two rooms: a living area with couch and Murphy bed in opposite corners, and the bathroom. Meals would be brought by the production hands who would also clean the classroom and attend to the kids at dawn and dusk. Before leaving, he pointed to the floor-length mirror near the bed.

“There is the one ‘hidden’ cam. Use it to your advantage. Any questions?”

Bruce frowned at the cramped living spaces.

“Don’t say one bad word, my brilliant teacher. You already got \$20,000. You don’t also get the Ritz.”

The next morning, Bruce arrived twenty minutes early to the classroom. The six boys and six girls were already seated, dressed in blue bottoms—pants for the boys, skirts for the girls—and pressed, white tops. The girls wore pigtails, the boys’ black hair all freshly buzzed. Bruce said hello. The nearest students fidgeted in their seats. Cameras or no cameras, the first day of class never changed.

At his desk, Bruce stared at the day’s lessons as if they were dense and engrossing. A brief list of words—“name,” “sound,” “repeat”—had been translated with Gari’s assistance, who hadn’t forgotten his Quechua. Bruce read these syllable by syllable. A few minutes before eight o’clock, he began with roll. On the hour, the bell, hung above the whiteboard, clanged so loudly the pen flew from his hand. Bruce stared at the bell for making him already seem the flailing, nervous sweats type of teacher that he wasn’t. He smiled at the kids, reminding himself he was here for their sake, not the viewing public. Realizing there was no need to say anything more to them, he started class.

“A,” he said and pointed to the flattened tongue in his open mouth.

“A,” they said and pointed to the flattened tongues in their open mouths.

“B,” he said and pointed to his pursed lips.

“B,” they said and pointed to their pursed lips.

They repeated the alphabet twice together. The physical cues were taken from the latest pedagogy, the vocabulary lists as well. He knew that fluency was impossible, and

his goal was to have the kids reacting to and creating spontaneous language. But phonetics was the foundation. Memorized sound by memorized sound, they would build.

Later, they switched to writing letters in order. The armpits and chest of his grey button-up were visibly soaked through. As he patrolled the rows, he kept his back to the camera, arms at his side.

At eleven, the bell shocked them again. The kids ran outside to play, watched by the cameramen. As they skittered over the playground, Gari pulled Bruce back inside the doors.

“Brilliant. Brilliant,” he said.

“How badly do I smell?”

“It shows your passion. Plus cameras can’t smell.”

“The students can.”

“Don’t worry about the students. Or, I mean, worry about the learning.

Remember, they are sponges—” he struck a blow with an invisible hammer. “Go fast, go hard. Test them, give them some urgency. They can take it.”

“That does promote learning,” he agreed, even though Gari seemed to be channeling a high school wrestling coach.

When the kids, cheeks flushed, returned to their desks, Bruce surprised them. He read a name from roll and pointed to a letter on the wall. “What?” he said in Quechua. They were either confused or afraid and didn’t respond. Only one student, Bo, said anything, a word which elicited an eruption of laughter.

Bruce stood, face reddening. He passed out a worksheet he’d planned to assign later and ordered them, “Practice.” He stared at Bo. She was the tallest in the class; she’d

been the center of the girl's circle at recess. The type of girl who would one day bring nothing but misery to her daughter-in-law's life. He unstuck his shirt from his chest, sat down, and composed himself.

At the four o'clock bell, the students bolted again outside. A few boys yipped along with the metallic clatter. After recess was dinner, an hour of supervised homework, then the teacher and students could retreat to their separate corners. Gari flitted between the boys and girls, greeting them by name. He joked, zipped their jackets higher. Bruce always admired the intimacy adults expressed with strangers' kids in other cultures. It spoke to the US's own lack of openness, of trust.

"What are they saying about the class?" he asked Gari. The two stood beside the star-topped fountain, whose gurgling waters had already clogged.

"They say it's fun, but they're tired. It's so much school for them."

"It's a lot for me."

Gari nodded. He took out a pack of cigarettes, spun them in his hand.

"You're right. They could help you more, huh?"

Bruce surveyed the children. Lisa was lining up small stones at the edge of the blacktop and conversing with them. Marco hung from a monkey bar, staring at the ground. Bo was on a swing, tucking and kicking her legs. A group of boys ran in a game of chase. A cameraman sent the boys toward Lisa, scattering her stones, and she shouted after them.

Bruce entered the classroom two minutes before the morning bell. The students' hands were already raised. Some waggled both hands in the air, as if they were riding a

rollercoaster. They shouted over one another in an avalanche of ABC's. As a sedative, he assigned them written work. One boy ripped his pencil through the paper in his rush. He stuck the halves together with his own saliva rather than waste time getting glue from the back. Their commitment seemed so unwavering that Bruce stepped away to use the bathroom. The best students didn't require a teacher to motivate them.

From the small lobby outside the class, Bruce saw Gari sitting cross-legged on the rim of the fountain. He was smoking, staring at a tablet. He took a long drag and dropped the butt into the dry basin as Bruce approached.

"My brilliant teacher, I love it! The threat of anarchy."

Bruce peeked at the diligent class being videotaped from two different angles.

"You always watch?"

"I have to. I take notes on what moments to keep, begin to edit. Once we're done shooting I only have two weeks to design the first episodes. It's a lot of work, but I'm proud that it's just me. Not too many chefs in the kitchen."

"Well what magic did you work to make them so enthusiastic?"

"Not magic, just incentive." He shook his head. "My stupid fault. I forgot the importance of motivation, man. So last night we promised them that the two highest scoring children at the end of the show will win televisions."

"They're learning for a TV? You couldn't think of anything more educational?"

"These are eight year old kids. They don't know what a 'scholarship' is," Gari said, scratching a line in his thin, black hair. "Look, think of this show as my baby. And understand that you, my brilliant teacher, are the head. But just the head. And when you

cry, I come rush to you. At the same time, there are other moving parts I have to watch and clean.”

Bruce asked for a cigarette.

“Do they even have electric?”

“That is a very good question,” Gari said and recrossed his legs. “True or false, teacher: The kids will learn more as a result.”

They watched the screen. Occasionally, a student glanced up and then returned to writing.

“Cat,” Bruce said, standing beside a projected cartoon kitten. “Meee-oww.”

“Cat,” they said, their faces shadowed with the lights turned off. “Mee-oww.”

They laughed. Bruce laughed.

“Bat,” he said, after clicking to the next powerpoint slide. “*Crack.*”

“Bat,” they said. “*Crack.*”

Someone smacked a desk.

A few nights later, exhausted, Bruce lay on the couch. In a book his Japanese middle-schoolers had read, an American boy comes home from school, sprints on his bed, and wastes away the afternoon by staring up at the ceiling. The students wondered why the boy did this. How? Bruce answered that this is what we do in the US. We come home, a little bored and depressed, and stare at the ceiling. Their faces changed from puzzlement to fascination, and ultimately dismay. He knew the feeling, as a History

major, having listened to Finance students complain about future jobs their dads scored them. “Depressed,” the Japanese kids scoffed. A luxury of the under-burdened.

Bruce rose from the couch. He left his dorm, passed the brightness and squeals of the students’ dorm. A cameraman hurried out to follow. Bruce wasn’t surprised.

“Where you going?”

“To look for a book in the library.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to read.”

“Why?”

He considered less polite responses but said, “Because I shouldn’t be bored.”

The cameraman helped him unlock the building. Bruce switched on the light of his room and smiled. An empty classroom at night or illuminated by the slanting beams of sunrise was a solemn, almost sacred place.

The books were organized by thickness, the lower shelf holding a few novels the students would never read, even in some alternate life as an English speaker. He chose a James Bond rip-off and saw Gari’s name written inside the cover. Lines were highlighted, the margins littered. He laughed, turned to the cameraman. “Gari’s old book.”

The cameraman continued staring into his lens.

In Bruce’s own lessons plans, he could easily be found. The video clips he showed and examples he used betrayed his own world of interest, and he felt a little sorry for criticizing Gari’s actions. While Bruce controlled the classroom, this broader reality

was Gari's—with all of its quirks and limitations. This was his baby, and no one tolerated their baby being called stupid.

Bruce returned to read on his couch. *Why? Need to know*, Gari had written at the end of a chapter cliffhanger. *Boring...* was scribbled in the margins repeatedly, beside a supposedly clever turn of phrase, but also the belabored fight scenes. Reading the spy novel filled him with a nervous energy, and when it seemed everyone would be asleep, he crept out the door and improvised a workout on the jungle gym. Squats, sprints, push-ups and pull-ups until he was just a hanging piece of flesh, shirt off.

In the morning, he stretched his tingling arms while the students' heads bowed over a test. He continued doing it at recess, as Gari approached from the stone path.

"Stressed?" he asked, smiling. "Well I have good news and bad."

The good news was that he'd be getting an Assistant.

"But I don't need an assistant teacher. The kids are learning great, or, at least they're repeating great. They're well-behaved."

Gari guided him toward the playing children. "Her name's Tera. Middle class Limeña, smart. Her English is better than mine. Spanish and Quechua, too, actually. She'll graduate from our best university this spring to be an English teacher like you."

"We don't need two teachers in the classroom."

"You and her have a lot in common."

"You're not listening."

"Oh, I'm listening, man!"

A cameraman turned from the student he was interviewing and approached them. Gari grabbed Bruce's elbow, directing him toward the school. "Let's talk in private," he said.

In the single-toilet bathroom, Gari walked to far wall while Bruce leaned against the closed door. Gari lit his cigarette, exhaled into the toilet bowl, then shut the lid and flushed.

"I can do this myself, Gari."

"It's the children. This is for the children."

"You mean the sponges? None of what you do is for them."

Gari sat on the toilet to consider this, knees on elbows. He didn't disagree.

"You promised me complete control over the learning environment."

"The assistant will give you more freedom, less work."

"But I'm here to work."

"Ah! You said you were here for the students. For them. And this is better for them. True or false?"

The muffled clatter of the bell rang.

"What was the bad news, Gari?"

"Oh!" he said, slicking back his hair. "Well, you can probably guess given the good news. Since you have a new assistant, she needs to sleep somewhere, no?"

That night, Bruce and Tera lay naked in bed. She had introduced herself to the class after lunch, immediately organized them into three groups and assigned leaders.

They followed her, group by group, outside. In two tight lines, they faced her and followed her movements for their single vowel vocabulary words.

“Fox,” Tera said, dropping on all fours and then raising her right arm like a lifted paw.

“Fox,” they said, dropping on all fours and then raising their right or left arms.

She wagged her arm until everyone mirrored her.

“Mud,” she said, rolling once to her right.

“Mud,” they said, rolling once to their left.

She told Bruce he could do more supervising this way, then more speaking.

Bruce’d performed kinesthetic learning, but never with this type of spunk. He felt cheated, outshone, but he was also speechless. The kids practiced words straight through recess that afternoon. There was actual joy in their eyes. Tera was a pony-tailed dynamo; she was some type of light-skinned, expertly programmed, English teaching robot. This is what he’d told her before sex.

“This is not my first rodeo,” she had said.

“Even your idioms are perfect.”

She spread her long arms so one fell across Bruce’s chest, the other hanging off the edge of the bed. She was whispering something but he wasn’t paying attention. His inclination had been to mock the seemingly simple math that reality television shows employed, the manipulation. Now that he was inside the equation, he appreciated the deliberate thought regarding the personalities and situations. It made sense why Gari had quizzed him about his ideal woman in the weeks before shooting. He could also imagine

that Gari asked her explicitly, “Would you sleep with this man?” This didn’t cheapen his admiration or attraction to Tera, and he appreciated Gari a little more.

“I’m glad they brought me you,” he said.

“I was shocked they selected me. There were prettier women trying for the role.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I only tried because my friend bet me I wouldn’t. Being on television is not appealing. And to tell the truth, this show seems especially manipulative.”

“For the students, yeah.”

“No, I’m speaking as a Peruvian, as part of the problem, you know?”

Bruce shrugged. She raised an eyebrow.

“Quick history lesson,” she said. “These kids come from populations that the Spanish, then the mixed-races like me, have been murdering for hundreds of years. Now, it seems, the idea is that we’re going to sit down and be entertained by these indigenous kids.”

“That’s not what the show’s about,” he said, sitting up. “It’s about education, opportunity.”

“Doubtful. How many people actually like to go to school? Now why would people want to watch kids sit in school?”

“To learn a little bit, root for the kids.”

“Then you should also ask yourself why they chose a white teacher. They want to laugh at you, too. About which, I’m not sure how I feel.”

She pinched his long nose. “But I don’t think you’re a clown. Those students pronounce very well.”

He shrugged her away and stood. "I'm doing this to teach. That's my role."

His nakedness gleamed at him in the mirror. Rather than stare a moment longer, he moved from the mirror's view to Tera's bedside.

"No one disagrees, Bruce. But do you think it could be that simple?"

"I'm the teacher," he repeated to himself.

She winked at him and whispered, "I'm a better one."

Bruce wanted to hunt down Gari the next morning, and while he could have left Tera to teach, he didn't want her alone in the spotlight. Instead, Bruce led the class outside to play charades. The cameramen, slumped against the wall, woke with a start, but there was no sign of Gari there or at the playground.

Each group formed without prompting, and Tera explained in Quechua the value behind inventing new ways to mime their vocabulary words. Once the students began, Bruce moved from the group below the monkey bars to the group shouting, "Dig! Dig!" at Bo, who pawed up dirt from her hands and knees. The laughter was infectious, Bruce joining in. Then the game was reversed and the students valiantly tried explain a word without speaking it, especially difficult with their limited vocabulary.

Only when Gari appeared at recess did Bruce remember he was on the warpath.

"My brilliant teacher," Gari said with a half-hearted flourish of his hand.

"Don't call me that. One question, true or false."

"You're the teacher."

"Is this show about educating kids?"

"Yes," Gari said. "True. But why are you asking?"

“Tera. Thank god for her—even if she is putting me to shame.”

“What a night to decide to sleep. What is she saying?”

“That I’m the clown. That you’re exploiting me and these innocent indigenous kids.”

A ball had rolled toward them, and Gari kicked a tailing shot between two boys. Tera, who was showing the children how to link arms to form a human wall, whistled at the men to be careful.

“Exploitation? You have your money, right?”

“I did this to teach.”

“Good. Then stay in teacher land. TV is my job. Story, my job. But interpretation is one of those things away from our control. These kids are getting a rare experience, quality education—isn’t that what you care about?”

Gari’s rising voice drew the boys’ attention. He shouted at them, and their heads turned slowly away. Tera glared at the men, arms folded, before connecting the two boys with the gleeful line of kids already squiggling across the playground.

“I don’t trust your little game anymore,” Bruce swept his arm across the grounds.

“Do I blame you? No. Even I’m losing control over it. I just spent all morning with the Producer. He is happy with this show but he already has an idea for another. ‘Little Native in the Big City.’ And can you guess whose job it is to set it up?”

Gari gestured for the cameraman to approach and spoke quickly under his breath, “But I’m still flying this boat, yeah? Trust in me.”

Bruce realized Gari’s cropped hair was dyed lighter, and his face whitened with makeup. Gari nodded at the camera and put an arm around Bruce’s shoulder. He led him

toward the playground. Gari stopped, turned back to the hazy capitol and with a sigh guided Bruce farther.

“As this show’s Director, I don’t get to talk much to you, Bruce. So I want to tell you a little about myself so you might understand why this show’s important to me. I was born and raised in Lima, fighting for food, watching for police while my older friends ripped copper wires from streetlights, from abandoned houses. But for some reason, a foreign teacher took a chance on me. He encouraged me, recognized my intelligence like no other had before. It changed my life. You remind me of that teacher. Handsome, wise. And when I look at Bo—” he narrowed his eyes at Bruce, a look that warned, *Don’t*. All the while, the cameraman scampered a half-circle about Gari.

“I see my younger self, a kid who doesn’t know how talented she can be. She doesn’t know how better education, how Lima can unlock opportunity. But Lima will unlock. I just hope she’s inspired enough by you and your lessons so that she studies there one day.”

“You aren’t serious.”

“That’s good,” Gari said to the cameraman, who nodded and jogged back to watch the kids.

“There’s no way I’m doing this,” Bruce said.

Gari tugged him close. “All our brown asses need you, man.”

“What is this?” Tera asked, raising her right arm.

“This is arm,” they said, raising their left arms.

“What is that?” she said, pointing to the sun.

“That is sun,” they said, pointing to it.

“Jump for the sun!” she shouted.

They jumped in place, girls’ skirts and braids bouncing. A grinning cameraman flanked the two orderly rows of students. Bruce examined this from afar, standing on the rim of the fountain, holding the star for balance. He felt the other camera’s gaze hard upon him, and his own gaze hard upon the students. He didn’t want to get any closer, any farther away.

“Star, run to the star,” Tera ordered. The twelve children broke their ranks to sprint toward Bruce. They stopped and formed a circle around the rim, staring up for directions. Bruce hoped for the bell to announce recess.

Bruce sat and thought in the most private place he knew, his tiny bathroom. While he was anxious to recount Gari’s conversation to Tera, whose educational scruples and smarts would bring clarity, she oversaw the kids’ homework completion at the end of the school day. He heard the knock announcing dinner but remained seated on the toilet, head in his hands. Somehow he found himself in a setting more corrupted than the greedy Japanese academies, more uninspiring than the Argentinian school. For all the times failure had crossed his mind while preparing for this show, quitting hadn’t.

When Tera entered, he tugged her into the bathroom. She pushed and fought him, but he managed to shut the door.

“What are you doing?”

“Sorry,” he said. “This is the only place the camera can’t see us.”

Bruce lifted his hands from her, stepped back. She nodded, but her fingers gripped the doorknob.

“What is so urgent, Bruce?”

“You were right. This show is complete exploitation.”

“Thank you. But it is reality television.” She shrugged. “What did you expect?”

Bruce sat down on the lip of the tub.

“Maybe I was naïve, but after what I saw today—” He ran the water, lowering his voice as he explained the show’s changing motivations, the spin-off starring Bo.

“Bo?” Her face lit up. “She deserves it. She’s the best speaker and actor.”

“How are you okay with that? They’re going to exploit the kid even more.”

“They are setting her up to be a celebrity. Who are you to judge if this is good or bad for her?”

“I’m the teacher. We are the teachers. It’s our job to protect them. And as far as I can see, the only way we can do that is quit.”

“Oh, the foreigner English teacher,” she sneered, rolling up her sleeves and wiping the sweat from her forehead. “The mercenary. You do not protect our kids. You profit, and then when you have your fill, you sail away on your little ship.”

“That’s not what’s happening here. I’m quitting for the sake of these kids. And if you quit with me, they won’t be able to televise this fiasco.”

“I have studied five years at university so I can become a teacher. I am applying for jobs. Quitters do not get jobs.”

“This’ll ruin your reputation.”

“Do you see what the children are learning from me? This is a platform, just like for Bo. And we would all appreciate if you did not risk our futures for the sake of your ego.”

Bruce looked at the fogged mirror, realizing he’d only gotten more confused. “Fine. If you want to stay on, I’ll tell Gari that they should do the show with you as teacher.”

“Oh thank you, thank you so much,” she said and pretended to bow. Tera reached across him to the shower faucet. “Please, you are wasting water.”

Bruce left the dormitory an hour early, unable to sleep, to sit at his desk in peace. His classroom door was already ajar, lights on. For a moment, he thought it was Tera, but as he’d departed she was still sleeping on the couch.

Bo sat in her corner desk while Gari crouched behind. He ran a finger along the work the girl was completing. A cameraman, back to the nonexistent students, captured a close-up of the two together. Then a view of Gari, blinking wearily and almost mournfully upon the girl.

Gari acknowledged Bruce by mouthing, “No choice.”

Bruce turned to the white board, searching for a combination of sounds or pictures to make them understand this show’s injustice. He thought of sitting at his desk until they’d all arrived so he could say in Quechua, “Classroom wrong. Classroom wrong,” banging his fist into palm like a monkey signing. Instead, he wrote in red marker, *I quit*. Then he locked himself in the boy’s bathroom and waited.

“Let’s talk,” Gari called after knocking. He lowered his voice. “Come on, the camera’s watching me and I hate it even more than you.”

Bruce let him in.

“Whatever you do, don’t quit.”

“You see the board? It’s too late.”

“I will erase it. Or write a new message.”

“That’s exactly why I’m quitting. This is all a lie.”

“Not the first day, I thought.”

Gari lit two cigarettes and gave one to Bruce. They smoked in silence, directing their exhales toward a lone, barred hole cut below the ceiling.

“Bruce, this was not my original conception. You know that, right?”

He shrugged.

“You feel betrayed? I do, too. That’s all I’m saying, man. But don’t think for a second that this show dies with you. We keep going. The Producer already has a plan to replace you.”

“Of course, Tera.”

He slid down the wall into a squat. “She’s paid to be the assistant. She stays the assistant.”

“Then who?”

“Why do you think I’m in the classroom this morning? This isn’t for fun.”

Bruce laughed. “You’re in charge of the sponges?”

“You shouldn’t be laughing, man. As soon as you go, you give up control over the story. We’ll change directions again. Ask yourself, what do the people want to see once

the American teacher leaves: the students learn English and everyone is happy, or everything go to Hell?”

Gari batted the roll of toilet paper into a heap on the floor.

“You see? It’ll be better for everyone if you don’t quit. Just go and erase what you wrote on the board.”

Bruce threw his cigarette butt into the toilet and laughed at Gari’s histrionics. “I’ll be in my dormitory until there’s a ride to take me back to the city.”

Bruce left but not before peeking in his classroom. The show he wouldn’t miss, but the classroom—its supplies and conveniences and twelve occupied desks—he’d probably never see another like it again. Bo was gone, and the room once again sat empty, expectant.

Through the lobby’s doors, he saw the students lined up across the foot of the steps, Tera at the middle. He pushed open the door, Gari following.

“This is lucky,” Bruce said, looking at Tera. “I wanted to say goodbye.”

The students held sharpened pencils and scissors in their fists. Bo, he noticed, was clutching a camera to her chest. The cameramen were tied to the opposite ends of the monkey bars.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she said, leaning on something like a broom handle.

“Roll the camera,” Gari shouted in Quechua, but Tera told the girl otherwise. She rose two steps and swung her staff at Bruce and Gari. They stumbled backwards.

“Everything will continue exactly as it was,” Tera said.

A strange sucking sounded from the fountain. Suddenly, it spurted to life, spraying high into the air. The water was brown, then green, then almost water.

The Vitamind Sessions

A quick tour of Marta's house was all that was necessary to see the irrefutable evidence of her fervent self-improvement. A mini, medium, and industrial-sized wok hung from her kitchen ceiling, leftovers of the Chinese and Vietnamese cooking courses. Two sewing machines and mannequin were stored in her attic along with an elliptical and a wire-bound contraption meant to use your own weight against you. There were stops in her journey that left subtler marks. She spoke with her hands and smiled generously when she talked, a Toastmaster's remnant. Her prominent shoulders and straight spine had been earned through the few hundred hours of yoga instructor certification. Occasionally I referred to her as Superwoman, which she disliked, but I argued was further confirmed by the long nights she spent refurbishing furniture in her garage-turned-workshop, her Fortress of Solitude. No matter what interest she explored or limit she expanded, she would return there most evenings.

I never protested or complained: as middle-aged adults, we were who we were. But I felt a wave of satisfaction on the few nights she spent with me. In just four months together, Marta had already instigated the minor change inside myself that only the right people can—in how my eyes worked. They began to see the city of Asheville other than for its nuisances of tourists and traffic. I was looking with her eyes, noting with intrigue at the fliers advertising inexpensive seminars, stopping to admire the boxdrummers and fiddle-players lining the sidewalks. What I had criticized as Asheville's yuppification, I

could see as re-creation, an evolution from its humble beginnings as a crossroads of Indian paths (and named for a politician of all things) into one of America's best and quirkiest places to live.

On the evenings we spent apart, Marta would still call to talk about our day's headaches or surprises. Dispensing with this, we'd say goodnight, and I'd search for a basketball game on TV. So when I heard Marta silent on the other line, unwilling or unable to hang up, I knew her mind was gnawing on something.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked.

"Jack, I don't want you to get upset at what I'm about to ask."

"What's the matter," I said.

A yoga friend, Jade, had gotten an invitation to a long-weekend retreat in the Blue Ridge foothills. It was here she drank Vitamind, a plant-derived serum that blocked all form of thought, any inkling or anxiety or temptation. In return, your capacity to feel expanded, and through feeling you then could know—firmly and deeply. It was like meditation on steroids.

"Oh, I've seen articles about these things. What is it, peyote? Ayahuasca?"

"Nothing like that. There's no ridiculous visions, there's no vomiting. It's just a cup of clear liquid."

"Well now it sounds like mineral water," I said. "Who's stupid enough to pay for that?"

Marta said that Jade was always assertive about what she wanted, but since the retreat her needs were as clear as water. She realized her job was harming her, and she quit. Simple. Revolutionary.

“She’s recommended both of us for the next retreat,” Marta said. “This is an opportunity we need to seize.”

I had serious doubts about what this opportunity was, or that Marta knew herself. Instead, I chose a less confrontational question. “Why did you think I’d get upset?”

“Well,” she said. “Jade’s description of the sensations reminded me of what you felt after your divorce. I thought you’d be skeptical. But, oh, if you were to just see Jade, you’d understand we’d be fools not to take the chance.”

I told her I’d think it over and we said goodnight. I spent the next few hours investigating Vitamind. There were thirty million search results for the term itself, although it had auto-corrected to Vitamin D. “Vitamind ritual Asheville” and “vitamind drug revitalize” produced nothing like what Marta had explained, and more advanced searches also failed. It seemed hard to believe her friend had really discovered such a transformative experience for which no blog post, no tweet, no Better Business Bureau report existed. I lay awake in bed, unsure of who to trust, until sometime after midnight I chose Marta.

Marta and I had originally connected online and messaged for a week before we agreed to meet for lunch. With her slim arms folded across her chest, she quizzed me about my profile like a doctor compiling a medical history. The photo and listed age, 51, were two years off. Everything else—non-smoker, politically and religiously unaffiliated, seeking serious relationship or friendship—was true, actually. She moved on to my divorce, or as she put it, the “failed marriage.” I told her she didn’t want to hear about it, but she persisted.

Tammy and I got hitched when we were still kids, barely twenty, and separated two years later. We wanted a baby, and while we rearranged our schedules around ovulation, Tammy still couldn't get pregnant. We were unlucky—that's how I chose to look at it. She took it as a sign. I pressured her to keep trying, she grew bitter, and divorce was our only option. Rather than meet new people or try new things, I isolated myself. I rented a one room basement apartment whose only sound was the tinny knocking of the pipes from the shared bathroom overhead. Some nights I spent crying on my cot bed, angry or afraid for her. When upset, the collarbone sunk and the shoulders scrunched my upper-body into a fist, but with gentler moods came a broadening of my physical heart. I imagined it as a velvet pouch, but after enough nights alone, its contours presented differently. I felt its pump, pulpy and rigid. I felt the intimacy between my left elbow and triceps, as if the blood flowing there was warmest. At first, these sensations worried me. They led me to call old friends for their interpretations or to visit doctors' offices, asking about angina. I was told it was grief, or given prescriptions for muscle relaxers, but the pills did nothing to the nightly sensations, which after months in that awful apartment, I accepted as essential to me. They were me, and once I discovered that watching TV or only particularly exciting books could dull it, there was nothing more to investigate.

While this wasn't a story I told most women, I continued because Marta seemed so affected. So much so that when our food arrived, she'd forgotten what she ordered.

"Your commitment," she said. "Your endurance."

I shrugged and bit into my burger.

"You don't talk to Tammy anymore, I'm assuming?" she asked.

“That’s the happy ending,” I said. “We chat a couple times a year. Out of the blue I’ll get a call. About ten years ago, she got married, a wonderful guy. She ended up having a kid in her forties.”

“Really?” she asked, leaning over the table. “Then those two were meant to be.”

“That’s what Tammy says: ‘the body’s a potent messenger.’ But she says a lot of things.”

After a few dates, I wondered if I was enough for Marta. She kicked my ass on a five-mile hike and dragged me to a weaving demonstration. We went to a cowboy-themed restaurant where they were teaching a Chilean dance called the *cueca*. At the beginning, you mirrored your partner, each stepping in a half circle. Then the music changed pace, and I couldn’t keep the next moves straight. I endured a few dances before going to the bathroom and returning to our table. Marta continued dancing solo, twirling wildly and making herself laugh. It was nice, all the more if I wasn’t required to be step-by-step with her. And if that was what she wanted, well, that wasn’t me. I knew what I was doing by taking a seat.

Not much later, she joined me. “I was missing your moves out there. Is there anything wrong?”

“No. It’s just—this is my kryptonite.”

“No, you’re good.”

She tried to nudge me onto my feet.

“I’m not a dancer. I do better with boring. A documentary, et cetera. If that’s not your thing—”

“It’s not necessarily my thing,” she said. She ran her hands through her hair. “So let’s go.”

We said nothing in the car until she told me to come to her place, if only for a minute. As water boiled on the stove, she studied me with her back against the fridge, her arms tucked behind.

“I have a tendency, Jack, to be demanding. Not that men do things for *me* but for them to keep doing things for *us*, for the relationship. But I know that wears guys down.”

“In my defense, I tried. My body just feels awkward on a dance floor.”

“I know you tried,” she said, frowning. “I don’t why I feel let down. It’s something I’m working on—not making men work so much. I mean, we’re not twenty-five anymore.”

I told her she shouldn’t compromise. At the same time, I’d prefer to expand our horizons through something other than a Chilean three-step. I was open, but I had my limits. She nodded. Then she hugged me, took me to the couch, and we fell asleep sitting beside each other like a much older couple.

On the drive to meet Jade, Marta explained how her friend had always solidly been her own person, but now she seemed like a force of nature. “Be prepared,” she warned.

Jade greeted us at the cafe with hugs and cups of kombucha. She was thicker than I expected, built the way women swimmers are: round and wide at the shoulders. She had big teeth, a bright smile. You couldn’t look around her.

“Tell him,” Marta said as we sat down. “Jack’s a little skeptical.”

“Not skeptical,” I said. “I just want to know more. This isn’t illegal, right?”

“If it is, I’ll gladly do the time,” Jade said, smiling. “But there’s nothing wrong with skepticism, Jack. When my friend told me about this ‘life-changing’ retreat, I was skeptical, too. I mean I’ve tried all that type of stuff: diets, prayer, LSD. When I was younger, at least. And look at me—I’m old.”

Her skin was tighter than mine or Marta’s. I had the most wrinkles of us all, actually.

“In the end, I figured that’s exactly why I should do it. It’s just three days, two nights.”

“What about the effects,” I said.

“I couldn’t tell you the science, but it makes this noisemaker we call our brain go quiet. You ever hear that thought is the opposite of action? Well it’s also the opposite of intuition. Vitamind eliminates thought to let you feel truth. For me, the nerve endings in my fingers burned for an hour, and I suddenly had this realization: I don’t want to deal with the stress of working in a kitchen ever again.”

“It’s just hard to see how that makes for a positive experience,” Marta said.

“I understand it,” I said. “Because sometimes you need to suffer. Life isn’t all pillows and rose petals.”

Jade took a sip of kombucha, which didn’t fail to surprise and delight her. “It is a little uncomfortable. But everyone who drank it with me was utterly peaceful. We didn’t even want to talk after the three days of silence was over.”

“The what?” I said.

“There’s no talking. And—” Jade wagged a finger between the two of us.

“There’s no touching. This is not a romantic getaway, it’s a working weekend for the soul.”

“I’m okay with that,” Marta said.

Once Jade left for the bathroom, we reached for our glasses. The kombucha tickled the dry ridges of my throat.

“You’re really okay about this?”

“Yes,” Marta said. “Just look at her.”

“She does seem happy, or maybe just really, really high.”

Jade reappeared, walking back to the table. She was barefoot.

“What I don’t understand,” I said. “Is what makes a person like you—healthy, looks great—go and try something like this?”

For the first time, she hesitated. She frowned. “Something felt lacking. Don’t we all feel that?”

On the rolling drive into Appalachia, Marta said she would begin her silence as soon as we arrived at the retreat. She squeezed my hand.

“It might seem like I’m ignoring you over the next few days,” she said. “But know that my appreciation is there, Jack.”

“Same,” I said.

Her expression became more determined the farther into the foothills we drove. The deep blue of the sky was visible through the bare but budding limbs. We passed impressive vistas of the rocky valley and river. Still, it was Marta’s hand in mine that kept my foot light on the gas pedal.

The turnoff was marked by a little roadside real estate sign: “Retreat Here.” We parked at a locked gate with the other cars and followed a gravel path to a cleared pasture in the woods. There, a sprawling two-story log cabin and a pristine pond sat opposite a cluster of one-window pods half the size of railroad cars. Two young men, bright-eyed and wearing the retreat uniform of grass-stained jeans and striped polos, came to meet and direct us to our private pods. Marta winked at me as they split us up.

That afternoon we were allowed to mingle with the other six on retreat: a college-aged hippie, two middle-age couples who had met decades ago in AA, and a night club owner from town. We all sat on the porch of the main cabin. I introduced Marta and me as both committed to improving ourselves, even if that meant this bizarre thing called Vitamind. The flowerchild was responsible for most of the chatter, explaining in her lilting voice her prior experiences drinking the serum and the wisdom sprouting evening that awaited us all. “Vitamind only takes two nights to work,” she said. “But I’ve been feeling like it’s time to replenish.” I rolled my eyes and turned my back on them, following Marta’s lead.

That night, we followed one of the men up a winding trail to a tiny cabin. The west-facing side was all glass, revealing the sinking blaze of the sunset behind the mountains. A line of eight black yoga mats were laid out near the glass, and another sat alone at the opposite end. I lay on my stomach on the second mat, wanting to save one for Marta, but the hippie took the first mat and the club-owner hunkered down to my left. Marta folded in the lotus position beside him. One of the women who’d cooked our dinner entered gracefully in a flowing white khaki skirt and moccasins, an elegant carafe

and lute in her hands. Narrow glass cups, like tall shot glasses, had already been set in front of our mats.

“Hey y’all. I’ll be your facilitator,” she said, smiling. “Once you get your dose, turn around, drink, and face the void.”

She carefully poured the clear liquid in our cups. It smelled faintly of disinfectant, and I was unsure if that was the cup or Vitamind. The hippie raised hers for a toast, and I did the same. I spun and drank. The gunk was thicker than cough syrup, and one-by-one everyone hacked and cleared their throats. I saw the hippie run her finger inside the cup and lick it.

Our session began with a woodsy melody from the facilitator’s lute. My shirt grew heavy from sweat, a lapse in Jade’s description. I rolled to my back, then sat up, impatient. Length by kinked length, my intestines presented themselves, my heart swelling. The similarity to my nights in the basement apartment made me uneasy. There was nothing to dull the penetrating or persistent internal sensations here.

Eventually, a switch was hit in my brain and the usual neurons stopped firing. I began to feel a roiling in the stomach. Pain tingled down through the longest muscles of the legs, into the feet. The sensation welled in them, the bones disappeared. The feet were necrotic, but I couldn’t decide on an action, couldn’t worry. My size 12s were matter-of-factly necrotic. Suddenly, the feet turned blacker and I turned for any other point of distraction. The wilderness had grown thicker and darker, the view through the glass almost pitch black, and the music had sunk into silence, but now I heard the club owner on my right spitting every few seconds. By concentrating on the noise, my heart slowed, the dead weight of the feet was dissipating. Then Marta’s soft cries reached me. She was

sniffling, and I tried to wonder what was affecting her. To try to think was like swimming up a waterfall. Instead, despite the retreat's rules binding us to ourselves and silence, my body fumbled its way around the club owner and to her mat, almost tackling her. Bile, sweat, and hormone—this was me when my arms tightened around her. I had never hugged a person quite like that, as if from the inside out. It's sad to think I might never hug someone like that again.

Marta quieted and relaxed in my arms. When I understood my job was done, I returned to my spot. Eventually, a half-formed thought echoed, then a complete one: it's cold in here. The soothing darkness and silence expanded, distracting me from my body. My brain had a delightful gummy slowness to it. Then the facilitator clicked on her headlamp and told us to be careful getting back to the pods.

It wasn't until early next morning as I circled the pond, my mind and body feeling shaken free, that it occurred to me Marta might be upset. I'd strayed from the rules and violated her own austerity. She'd been so hopeful about Vitamind. I continued circling, waiting for her to leave her pod, wondering how to communicate my apology. When Marta emerged and waved, she looked polished new. She blinked and smiled at me, no wrinkle of questioning in her lips or brow. She held her hand out, fingers spread. I raised mine and came so close as to feel the synchronizing pulse in our wrists. In unison, our hands floated away from our bodies, then back toward our center, the paper-thin space between us vanishing.

The second night, I didn't drink. I turned to the window with my cup and secretly let the liquid dribble down my beard in the dark. In the hours leading to the session, I'd reflected that one day was good for me. It's not that I distrusted this shortcut to a better

self. I just didn't need it. I'd already been changing my ways, challenging myself with Marta. That I was here was enough.

For the next few hours I stared into night, glad my toes or eyeballs weren't aching with deep meaning. Marta was seated beside me (the club owner having moved to a spot at the far end). I heard her sigh heavily, never crying. As the heaviest effects of Vitamind diminished, a collective smile spread throughout the room, and when we filed through the door behind the facilitator, jokes were told, voices sang. The couple ahead of Marta and I stopped us, pointed upwards to a moonless sky, and asked if we'd ever seen so much potential in that sight. "Never," we answered.

On Sunday morning, I woke and felt the warmth of sunrise over my bare arms. We glowed at breakfast, exactly as Jade had predicted. The club owner was the first to depart for the cars. "I have some changes to make," he said as a goodbye.

During the return drive to Asheville, the sun was arcing over us, occasionally eclipsed by rafts of clouds, casting patches of the forested valley below in a darker shade. It wasn't until the signs for the city limits that I realized Marta and I hadn't spoken. There was only one thing that came to mind.

"Why were you crying the first night?" I asked. The words seemed too big for my mouth.

"Crying?" She glanced at the ceiling, eyes narrowing to remember. "I had this pain, like a cavity, cold and sharp, right here at the bridge of my nose. It was like I was being bullied by it. It was because of us."

She laughed.

"Why are you laughing?"

She squeezed my hand between hers. “Relax, it’s nothing. At first, I knew it was you—that you weren’t right for me. But then you came and hugged me, and then I remembered you were experiencing this with me, and the pain disappeared. That’s when I knew: it’s just me, being a head case.”

I turned onto Marta’s street and drove at a crawl between the parked cars. I didn’t trust her belief. Or I didn’t trust in that single hug’s significance—in spite of its greatness—given how high and impressionable she had been.

“You’re sure?”

“Were you drinking the same stuff I was? There was absolutely no doubt.”

Parked in Marta’s driveway, we sat, facing forward. The reflected rays of sun were blinding but neither of us moved.

What amazed Marta and I most about post-retreat life was how fluidly and mindlessly decisions were made—not really decisions at all. I’d moved into her house, though neither of us remembered discussing it. We woke at seven with the alarm, took our vitamins, brushed our teeth and flossed after breakfast. I hopped in the car, gliding toward rush hour, and she suited up in coveralls. Some things didn’t change. She still spent many of her evenings in the Fortress of Solitude, but I noticed times when she hid away to sand or paint because she’d disappointed me or herself. I’d forgotten how living with someone—unlike living alone—reveals depths you wouldn’t have known otherwise, that that someone doesn’t or can’t recognize. After a month together, it was clear to me that the source of Marta’s self-improvement was her insecurity.

On her 49th birthday—her 50th year, I reminded her—I persuaded her to let me cook dinner. The menu I'd planned was simple: angel hair pasta with a rose sauce, which was beyond my reach as a cook but that Marta would help me with, insisting to help in some way. I bought a packaged salad and a half-baguette I'd slice, butter, and warm. There was no need for cake since she'd valiantly eliminated sweets from her diet.

I found the kitchen quiet, cleaned. I placed the dry red wine on the table and texted her I was home. Then I lit the oven, dumped the salad into a bowl. I called Marta, but her phone was off. Rather than risk ruining her birthday dinner, I went outside to the detached garage.

I entered the workshop without knocking, immediately bitten by the scent of lacquer in the three-car space. It gave me coughing fits, almost enough to turn my stomach. I raised the retractable garage door halfway, knowing Marta might protest anything more. Occasionally I entered to say goodnight and found her at one of the machines, her safety glasses on, arms covered in wood particulate or bits of leather. But amidst the wide wooden table, the lathe and jigsaw, the mill and belt sander, Marta was absent. The smell told me she was in the finishing room, the corner closet she'd built to protect recently varnished or painted projects where no floating wood dust would settle and ruin the finish.

In the enclosure, the bare bulb was illuminated over Marta as she sat on a rocking chair. A white mask covered her nose and most of her thin face, her eyes looking down at an object in her hands. She held what looked like half of a bowling ball, tan, auburn, and ochre veined. It seemed slick enough to slide down a lane without so much as a push, even though it was flat on one side. I told her I'd opened the door for ventilation but she

was silent. I tried “Happy birthday.” She raised her eyes, the brown made vivid by the white mask.

“Can I see it?” I asked.

She lifted it to take, and the smooth weight surprised me. It was an old and gigantic paper weight, which she bought for herself as a present. She said she’d spent the day adding layer after layer of quick-dry varnish. In the natural light outside the finishing room, I saw that it was hideous—so much so that I couldn’t help but tell her.

“I’ve worked all day on this,” she said. Her tone and stare and posture seemed to have been prepared, somehow knowing that would be my opinion. I waved her out into the openness of the workshop, the stench of the closet turning my stomach. I placed the paperweight on the table and pushed it away.

“We were supposed to do dinner,” I said.

“I’m not in the mood.” She sat across from me. I waited for her to talk, and after a sigh she began. “Jade gave me a birthday call today. She’s moving to Albuquerque.”

“There are greener pastures than Asheville?”

“A community down there is integrating Vitamind into daily life.”

“Seems like that’d be hell on your insides.” I said.

“It seems wonderful.”

“We don’t need it.”

She shook her head, took up the air hose. In spurts, she shepherded dust past my feet, toward the garage door. The cold compressed air whooshed past my legs, the sensation of flying, one that only Superwoman could provide.

“How can you be fine,” she asked between spurts, shivers rushing through me. “Never getting back to that clarity... I was never happier with me...I was never happier with you.”

Suddenly I felt myself falling, my stomach dropping, searching lower and lower between my spine and bowels. It was as if she’d guessed something about me and let go of my hand. Marta sprayed the already clean machines, the wind rushing upwards, and I hunched and rocked, hoping the feeling would hit something and stop.

“Forget about Jade. Forget about Vitamind. You’ll feel better when you do.”

“It’s about *being* better, Jack. And now that I know what it can be like—”

I groaned as the discomfort kept sinking. I fell from the stool onto the concrete floor. Marta’s masked face appeared near mine. She pressed on my abdomen, but I felt nothing. “Is it here, the appendix? Let me call an ambulance.”

“Don’t do it,” I said.

She was looking for her phone and didn’t hear me, or maybe the words never left my mouth but caught on the chain hurtling deeper. She’d removed her mask once she reappeared, her face scared but hopeful.

“They’re coming.”

“It’ll pass,” I told her, though the pain pressed against the insides of my stomach and radiated up through my neck. “This is where you’re wrong. This is why you suffer.” Marta squinted, viewing me from that distance. Not a bird, not a plane, but Marta in the sky, halting mid-flight to peer at the human on the concrete. She could see me now, the lengths I could reach to avoid myself. And I saw her, with an endless horizon before her, as soon as she lifted her eyes again. In that moment of recognition, she almost laughed.

She patted me on the shoulder until the paramedics came. They stretched me underneath the garage doors, took me to the hospital, and the next morning, just like I'd said, I was back to normal.

The Roadside Bar

It was Thursday, which meant a drink with old friends—college friends I'd graduated and moved to the city with. I descended from the twentieth floor in the bright elevator, let everyone file out ahead of me. I walked in the direction of the west exit, and halfway across the lobby, when an apparition appeared: the aquamarine frame, "Specialized" logo in black, black-taped ram's horn handlebars. The bike that carried me through the first month of my gap year, almost fifteen years ago.

I called to stop the woman pushing it. I jogged to them and asked her name. We worked two floors apart but you wouldn't have guessed it given the dark workout clothes she was wearing, the suit I had on. Her right hand rested on the leather saddle, no good for long distances.

"I haven't seen a bike like this since I said goodbye to mine in China."

"I've seen some around," she said and continued toward the glass doors.

"I just couldn't help myself. I haven't thought of it in years. Day after day, I just rode, too young to feel tired, no destination in sight. Through the country—" I jumped ahead as if to push open the doors but faced her instead. "Pedaling and pedaling."

"Sounds solitary," she said.

"No, you're right. Solitary is the perfect word for young me's trip."

When I asked to just sit on the bike, she surveyed me from shined shoes to haircut, as if this was a scam.

“No, I have a class.”

“Just one—” I said, but she was looking at her watch, at others around us who might help her in case I was a lunatic. I stepped aside and watched the bike wriggle through the sidewalk’s rush hour until it was gone.

From their perspective, I must’ve looked like a scrawny kid stuck on a foreign roadside, a long way from home. In reality, from the many days on my bicycle, I was stronger than I’d ever been, the traveler’s backpack an extra thirty pounds of weight, and although I did have a flat tire, it would only take a minute to patch and fill. Explaining this to the man who had pulled over and hurried out, though, was not so easy. I mumbled “no” in Chinese, but after the exaggerated gestures toward his vehicle and my bike, I let him tie it to the roof. Then he opened the back door, the teenaged daughter slid over, and I was herded into the seat behind mom. We rumbled over shoddy roads. The father turned the wheel, but as far as I could tell, it was there for show or fun. The car continued straight and sunk into potholes. With every quake of the suspension-less vehicle, I prayed at the ceiling. Save my bike, sacred means of travel, from this hick. Meanwhile, the daughter ducked her head and giggled. The long black hair covering her face prevented us from meeting eyes.

I spent only the night with them. To accompany tea that evening, the father brought out an atlas, presenting the oversized folio to me. He pointed to himself and to the few places he’d visited. “Whaaaaw,” he exclaimed as his hands formed a huge circle in the air—Hong Kong. I pointed too and dug out a post card I’d purchased there of the million neon lights. He cradled and rocked his arms and indicated where we were on the

map. He lay a wallet-sized photo of the family on the table: the daughter stood on the left end beside her mother, then the father accompanied by a son to the right. A handsome family by rural standards, not as stocky as most. Circling Macau with his fingertip, the father dashed off rectangular prisms reaching fluffy clouds, and he tapped the face of the young man. I looked to the women for help, but the daughter's eyes were elsewhere, the mother intent on the photo. I held my arms out, confused. The old man appeared to compose his thoughts before drawing a hard-hat and something like a "T" and "L" squished together with a dash overtop—the symbol for "money." Then, to show the son lived there, a bed. "Ahhhh," I said, admiring the explanation's practicality.

He shifted the maps and gave the pen to me. Following his example, I flipped to a page of the East Coast and underlined Philadelphia. I drew the standard square topped with a triangle, then the tiny rectangle and pig-tail of smoke. The house's three rows of windows must have confused them initially. My father and I were stick figures outside, him slightly longer and with "49" looming over his head, "18" above mine. I flipped through sections of the US until finding a page displaying Seattle. I made a modest home and a long, squiggle-haired figure to the right, hand raised in the air, "42" beside her. There was mumbling between the two women. To make it clearer, I outlined each parent in a cartoonish, broken piece of heart, which was to convey the separation that had begun a few months earlier (and the affair, years before) on the night my dad walked through the door to his bug-eyed wife brandishing a vase over her head.

The family nodded.

What else could I draw for myself? I couldn't think of anything unique. This trip, actually, was the first remarkable fact about me. It was my dad's idea—not the Grand

Tour of old, but an immediate opportunity for transformation, to shift the trajectory of my future, and a way to separate myself from the other freshman at Swarthmore the next fall. Except I'd been cycling on my Specialized, biking and camping to make my father's money last, and as a result, the ground covered had been little and uniform. Not to mention, their own province. They would already know about the squat-roofed homes and lush scenery. Still, I circled the chunk I'd traversed, going southwest from Hong Kong, and drew a vertical line and two doglegging, parallel lines meeting it, above which I added the sun, and below asterisks supposed to be tumbleweeds. Their eyes searched for meaning. I pointed inside my cup before holding it upside down. No drops fell from the rim. "The inside," I said. The mother rose and left the room. The girl clapped her hands, a confident and irresistible smile appearing. She then produced a series of circles: a giant one, then nine more, varying in size. She filled between the circles with dark scribbles, drew an arrow to them.

"Space," I said distractedly. She was close, but what I meant wasn't space exactly. In my mind, the tumbleweed hinted at nothingness. The deserted road explained: "lonely." The father had dropped his chin into his hand, lost in our abstractions. A second later, his wife returned with the tea kettle to fill me up. I didn't attempt to tell her "no."

They wanted more, so I pointed to the places I had plans for: Hanoi, for which I drew a dog, a cobra, and then I patted and rubbed my satisfied stomach. Cambodia's Angkor Wat—the sun setting behind the spires of the temple ruins, once a holy place, now a destination for tourists—which I couldn't make them understand. I sketched a curving wall of water for the Malaysian and Indonesian coasts. I hoped to surf the corduroy, golden-tinged waves of the South China Sea, sluicing through tongues of

water, pivoting on liquid, letting myself be carried closer to the high, solemn cliffs from which I'd camp and watch sunsets. A place, as a matter of fact, I never actually made it to.

The bright glimpses into my future took us late into the night. The father, yawning, removed the atlas and his wife the gritty tea. The daughter and I were left on opposite ends of the table. I began to doodle (as I used to when I didn't know an answer in class) a triangle, then another. With a few connecting lines they first formed a prism, and after I shaded two surfaces, a picture of my tent, which had already been raised outside. She craned her long, dark neck to see. I made a stick figure, and glancing again at her, added hair like a veil; my girl, similar to the blinking figure at crosswalks, was approaching my sleeping place. Through the wall I could hear the tinkling of washed cups, and the father wouldn't be much longer reshelving his book. If this were the States, I would only need to utter a suggestive phrase or two, but the steps of seduction weren't implicitly understood here. I worked faster to depict my girl as more than a few lines meanwhile blocking the picture from view with my right forearm. The dimensions and details of people had always been difficult for me to draw well, and after a rushed attempt at making my girl more human, I scribbled her out. She had transformed into something like the Bride of Frankenstein. I scribbled all of it out.

Before the mother rose to start breakfast in the early morning, I had silently packed up and gone.

It was near the border of China and Vietnam that my bike failed me. The frame had been stressed by the weight, and a hairline crack grew longer and longer. We had

been through a lot, but I couldn't continue knowing that at any bump in the road it might strand me. At a border town, I sold it—even after confessing the crack—to a foreigner headed the opposite direction.

Once I'd given it up, I didn't miss the old Specialized. The new sensation of intercity busses, of movement without effort of my own, both shocked and seduced me. No more sun-beaten days, I clutched my bag in unison with the other passengers, expecting our imminent arrival. Or I sat cross-legged, sampling snacks offered to me by neighbors while the landscape blurred past. I still scrimped. Busses were only necessary for the longest trips in that part of the world. I was happy to hitch a short ride in vehicles occupied by chickens, burlap sacks of pungent onions, or foolishly grinning men. You couldn't wave to highway cops from an overloaded pick-up bed in the States. Two men wouldn't invite you behind their van to smoke opium in a crowded parking lot either. In more ways than one, I began to sense my transition from an outsider to an insider. The world is open to me, I thought, feet dangling from an unlatched tailgate one afternoon. I don't even have to ask.

Part of this world was sickness, which called on me halfway down Vietnam's coast. My stomach convulsing, I staggered off the bus at the first town it stopped in, searching down the main road for anything close to a pharmacy. Block by block, more sandy earth stretched between the tiny shops or cement homes. I stopped. A bit further ahead I saw only road and trees. The turquoise bus station back at the main square still peeked above the other buildings' flat rooftops. There seemed only to be fringe and center, meat and bone. I kept going until the final building, larger than even the station. Set back from the road, the establishment was airy, wide and long with a gaping square

hole for an entrance so you could see the stretching bar and the tables lining the other side. Along the back wall, to the right of the “man or woman” bathroom, was a sliding glass door behind which hung a red velvet curtain.

“Hey gentleman,” a lady’s voice called as I stood at the open mouth of the place. “Come in.”

A woman stood alone behind the bar. She had black, shoulder-length hair and wore a throatless gown, grape green. I asked her if she knew English. She said she did.

“Maybe you can help me?”

The woman, Tam, drew in her lips skeptically. “We help.”

After I explained my issues, Tam called toward the back and another woman, equally as petite but younger, skipped out. Her gown was lower cut, a half-moon that revealed the skin below her collarbone. She threw an arm over my shoulder, and said, “You call me Nga.” Her face, slightly pimpled under the make-up, still seemed like it would be smooth to touch. My own girlfriends hadn’t been nearly as adept at covering their own break-outs.

“So cute,” she said, pinching my cheek. “Red like a little boy. How old?”

At that time, I was naïve enough not to bend the truth.

“You *are* a little boy,” she laughed when I told her.

“Not really—”

Tam interrupted in Vietnamese.

“Oh, sick,” Nga said in sorry surprise. “Be right back.”

While she was away, I used the toilet, vigilant of any twinge or wobble in my bowels. By the time I finally left the bathroom, a small brown baggie marked with snake

and staff had appeared on the bar. The girls were also there waiting for me. Embarrassed and flattered, I slowly sat on the stool.

“Man says pill every day. Seven days. No travel.”

“*Seven?*” I felt the words like a punishment. I was acquiring the taste for exploration, for growing fat on each day’s novelty. There wasn’t seven days’ worth here.

“Take the pill,” Nga said.

I unrolled the bag. “Give me a beer.”

“No, stupid. You sick,” Tam said. She put a can of coconut juice in front of me.

“Take.”

Nga pinched me until I swallowed the medicine.

I asked for a game of pool, but Tam wouldn’t allow that either. This as well as Connect 4, set out on a few tables, were the home-field entertainments. And forbidden from me, although neither was especially taxing compared to the cycling I had done. The women questioned me about my travels, Nga squeezing my thigh because she couldn’t believe I’d gone so many kilometers. They made the best of their adequate English, asking so many questions, even though it seemed like all of their nodding was done in place of careful listening. It was actually the most pleasant chat in my many weeks abroad, and I already felt better having placed myself in their hands.

When I was about to finish my coconut drink and check into a hotel, a middle-aged man entered. He was slight but with baggy overalls smudged by grease. Bypassing the bar, he hurriedly racked pool balls. Tam joined him and took the lead with a few smart strikes. She didn’t only eye a potential shot, she appraised it as you would a work of art just before hinging at the hips, her eyes dropping to the level of green felt. The next

time I glanced over, she was aiming with the wrong end of the cue, scratching badly, and soon the two were laughing as they disappeared on the other side of the sliding door. The curtain brushed aside for a moment and only for the space of their small bodies. Nga walked behind the bar.

“Who’s that?”

“Friend,” she said. She leaned across. “What you want to do?”

I suggested reracking the balls for a game. I was brash enough then to do anything badly rather than do nothing awkwardly.

She glanced at the curtain. “Sorry, can’t.”

“What else is there to do around here?”

“Sleep, listen music,” she said. Her face scrunched together. “Very boring here. You should stay, be boring with us.”

Nga leaned further across the bar, her muddy black eyes so near. I imagined her shoulders under that sequined gown as fleshy, pulpy enough to sink teeth into. My hand reached for a napkin, a pen, and lines began to form. A smile widened across her made-up face.

“Draw me, draw me.” She thrust her chin into profile and hands clasped overhead.

“No,” I said. “Anything else.”

I reproduced the bar for her, the bottles which I flecked with sparkles. Her face clouded as I drew sharp angles and bright surfaces. “You blind,” she scoffed. She took the pencil and drew what looked like a log topped with inflated bottles—jugs—tables and chairs floating in space alongside. Tam later created her own version in which the bar and mirror looked like a desk and window wall of a corner office, and she took the three

drawings and taped them to the mirror in a row. We looked from one empty bar to the next. I saw my reflection, then Tam's, and Nga's foregrounded against the tops of tables and chairs.

"They all bad," Nga said.

Out of this, a game evolved. From a pocket dictionary, we randomly selected and illustrated words—"limp," "push-up," "shield"—voting whose was best up on the mirror. We would play this throughout the empty hours of the following days, and it became clear where our talents lay. Nga was especially keen with action, energy. Tam figured out the harder ones, showed "tragedy" as a baby with "X's" for eyes. I preferred inanimate objects, which were rare. They laughed at my flat attempts at people: breastless females, chinless faces like puddles, a triangulation of ovals for eyes and a mouth. I knew what I wanted to draw, but with every line I departed farther from it.

Over the next few days, a handful of locals came, some foreigners, and the girls would win or throw the pool match or Connect 4 with grace and laughter—as long as both parties walked toward the curtain in high spirits. The men were gone within thirty minutes. On the third or fourth day, the man with greasy overalls entered. Tam was tabulating something on a notepad. Nga swept out sand that collected over the course of a few hours, stirred by traffic or wind. The man sat at a table and raised the yellow plastic skeleton of a Connect 4 board, which I came to learn was Tam's specialty.

She sat opposite him, sharing what sounded like chit-chat. I watched in the mirror how he touched her—just a little on the knee. She seemed more interested in the chatting than the game itself, even though she beat the pants off of him, three straight times. After he stood, shaking his head, Tam made him laugh and briskly escorted him behind the

velvet. I sat there, reflecting how nothing seemed wrong with the give-and-take between either party.

A minute later, the sliding door was thrown open. The man reemerged, speaking quickly. He waved at Nga. On his way out, he patted my shoulder, saying what sounded like a goodbye. Nga continued sweeping. I rubbed where he'd touched me. Had he seen the medicine and think I needed the comforting? I was confused. I was here to rest, to enjoy myself.

"What happened?" I asked.

"He forget the time. Late for work," Nga said.

The morning of the final pill, I sat on my hotel bed looking at the seven pop-tabs of my prescription, now hollow. Seven days was the longest I'd stayed in one place. Folded clothes were stacked beside my backpack. Out the open window, I could hear an engine much bigger than a motorbike's idling. I thought of the ticket I'd purchased for the Saigon-by-night bus. Rather than get up for the wastebasket, I tossed the prescription casing out the window.

"Late," Tam said, placing my usual on the bar.

"I'm healthy now," I said. "Give me a beer."

"Drink it first, dummy."

Nga rose from a Connect 4 table to greet me with a hug. I watched her walk back and resume spinning a red gamepiece and stopping it on edge. She delighted in the simple trick again and again. Her fingertips pressed into the table except for the index which hovered then slowly dropped. Her hand glittered from cheap perfume, and sometimes her

tongue would peek from her lips as she succeeded. It was only when a man entered that the piece clattered down.

I turned to see him adjust his sunglasses. His face was protracted, and the skin stretched over his cheekbones and sharp jaw like canvas over a frame. He seemed a specimen a phrenologist might display behind his desk, behind glass. At the end of the bar, he asked for a local beer, an import, and a glass. He chugged the cheap stuff and dipped the other bottle into the tilted glass to fill it. Nga sidled beside him.

Because of the width and depth of the bar, her thin voice seemed to get lost so that I couldn't understand the questions she asked. She had to resort to physicality for a response, tugging on his arms, or performing jumping jacks while asking how he stayed in shape. Her breasts puffed up and down. He stared ahead and continued sipping.

Having drank my coconut juice so quickly, I headed to the bathroom. For a moment, I was equidistant to the door on the left and the sliding glass on my right. Only in the last day or two of restored health had I begun to consider just veering right. In my mind, I'd find a windowless room which would lead to a nook large enough for a cot. A sink definitely existed because before customers reemerged, I always heard the opened faucet and slithering of water through pipes. In a lot of ways, there wasn't a difference in the functionality of the bar and what happened on the other side of the curtain.

When I came back, Nga was backpedaling, dragging the man to a Connect 4 table along the side wall. I stopped to watch.

"If we have to," he said in an Eastern European drawl. "Then I wager that I win."

I had never seen the girls bet. After all, these were just games—foreplay. Nga laughed and bounced her head up and down in the way nice people do when uncomprehending.

“He thinks he’s better than you,” I told her.

She tried to shoo me away. “Sorry,” she apologized to the foreigner. “He not understand.”

“I understand. Wager. Bet.” I searched for other words.

“Yes, wager,” the man said. “Cuoc danh ca.”

He placed a sum of money on the table and gestured to the back room.

Tam abandoned her post behind the bar, sensing a problem. But Nga’s fingers were already skimming over the tips of the colored money, arriving at an amount high enough to persuade Tam. As the foreigner whispered in Nga’s ear what he wanted for this risk, her eyes narrowed on the cash. She relayed in Vietnamese to Tam and the haggling began. The man and bartendress switched between languages while Nga returned to spinning a gamepiece, letting it clatter to a stop while her eyes drifted to the road. I wanted to pull her aside and have her sketch out the foreigner’s demands, as only she could. Instead, I took the opportunity to lean across the bar and pour myself a beer.

In the end, with a few hundred dollars on the table, they agreed to play for it. He had to defeat Nga in Connect 4 and Tam in pool, best of three. If he lost to either girl, he’d leave and they could keep the money. As a sign of good faith or arrogance, he told me to hold onto a cut of it.

With the four of us gathered at the table, the man went first. Nga did her best to distract him; a strange pleasure flowed through me as I watched her calf rub over his

shin, or when she whistled. But during the match the foreigner's lower lip rubbed forward and backward as the eyes roamed over the plastic frame. Nga lost quickly, appearing uncomfortable with her opponent's intensity. The following and decisive game progressed in the same way—just pointlessly drawn out because of Nga's attempts to think through each bumbling step. I said, "There," a few times, pointing. The man silenced me. Tam ordered me to sit at the bar.

"You're finished," he said, victorious. He demanded of Tam, "Next."

I thought she'd at least take a game from him, but she played like your stereotypical girl. Her break was feeble and she clunked balls off the sides. I suppose it didn't matter; he worked the rails, all of the angles elementary.

Nga brought the man to the other side of the glass doors. Her face was as placid as ever. Before Tam followed, she led me by the hand behind the bar. She removed bills from underneath the cash register.

"Money," she said to me, counting an equal amount to what the man had put me in charge of. We exchanged.

She instructed me not to move. "Have beer," she suggested.

I examined the King's flat face and the flora on the bills' front and back. They were identical to the ones from my wallet but unmistakably transparent when held to the light.

Almost an hour passed as I sat alone getting loaded off of free beer. I traced back the events that had led me here, an 18 year old at a Vietnamese whorehouse: the sudden illness, the rides with complete strangers, the miles exposed to the elements on my bike,

being fortunate enough to have it fly with me. Before I'd arrived to Hong Kong, before the gap year had truly started, I'd stopped in Seattle to see my mother. I let her squeeze my hand until the security check, and when I said goodbye, she asked, "Is this my fault? Why you're leaving like this?" I told her it was a chance of a lifetime (my father's words, not mine). After her last "I love you," I told her I'd be fine. Sitting at the bar, it dawned on me that—provided all the chances for things to go wrong—I was doing better than fine.

The tall figure opened and slid shut the door. Perspiration was rebeading above the golden frames of his sunglasses, the tight skin splotched with red.

"Money," he said. He pocketed the rectangular paper without a glance and exited.

I returned to my usual spot at the bar. Tam, after recounting the bills, placed two in front of me. I slid the money a seat to my left. As soon as Nga appeared from the back room, I approached her, pointed to where she'd come from. Her eyes flicked to Tam, but the bartendress said nothing, probably turned to the register. Nga waved me behind the curtain.

The room wasn't much larger than a closet, a mattress against the right wall and a sink and mirror opposite. On the floor was a clock radio. A lightbulb hung overhead but she kept it off. For the first time, I smelled man—the sweaty, failed deodorant smell.

As I sat on the edge of the mattress, I said, "I want sex. But whatever you want to do."

"I don't want to do anything."

She slumped down next to me. She spread her arms out so her hand rested over my leg. I had no problem talking like this.

“What did that guy want?”

She yawned. “Toes, he want to see our toes do things. Strange.”

“Strange,” I repeated stupidly. I don’t know why I thought it would be something brutal. For a while, we were silent, growing more relaxed in the sour air, until she rose from the mattress.

“I don’t want sleep. How much money you put on the bar?” she asked, soaping up her hands.

I told her and she said for that amount she could do it with the mouth.

Having pocketed condoms from my backpack that morning, I rubbed the plastic casings against one another. They would eliminate consequences, make sex seem like it never occurred. But the mouth? There was direct contact, you could contract diseases—though I wasn’t sure which. More importantly oral sex seemed explicit in a way I didn’t want Nga to be. I didn’t want to open my eyes and see me in her mouth. I wanted to see her.

“How about hands-only. Do guys ask for that?”

“Not normal.”

“Let’s do that.”

She undid and removed my pants. She slowly pressed down the pubic hair to hold the penis in place. There was no wild pressing up my thighs or stroking. She touched prudently, with a nurse-like attention to my body before the sensation made me close my eyes. I reminded myself this was simply masturbation, yet imagined Nga on top of me. It didn’t take long. She cleaned me with a damp, warm towel. I sat for a moment on the edge of the mattress with my pants buttoned, sandals on, waiting, I think, for us to leave

together. Then I realized it wasn't done this way, and I went out to the sunlit bar by myself.

Eventually we sat beside each other on the stools, like we had when I was sick. But now, I drank a beer and she rattled a red chip against the bar. I finished the glass, stood up and mentioned my bus ticket. "Come back soon," Tam said. I hugged Nga goodbye on her stool.

Walking out of the bar, a dull rolling sound made me turn. Tam was wiping a bottle of liquor, and Nga's back was to me. There at my feet was the red gamepiece. The throw had fallen pathetically short—if she aimed to hit me. Or maybe it was a memento, in which case it was a perfect toss. My hope, though, is that she just let it drop. All I know is that I felt so happy a few hours later to experience the bus accelerate from my past week's home.

My trip lasted five more months. That span I remember now for the strange type of world that presented itself. The names of popular destinations and obscene images are forever magnetized in my mind: Bangkok where I witnessed a woman release a live dove from behind the lips of her vagina, the bird describing an "S" above the crowd; deceptively beautiful transvestites harassing and cat-calling, outlining their own figures with their hands in Ko Phagnan. Banners hung above the countless Patong Beach pharmacies announcing: *We sell Testosterone or Viagra Here!!* I was surprised to find that so many bars also had Connect 4 boards or pool tables, but not surprised by the women loitering nearby. The protocol would be tacitly understood by the lone male travelers: sit down and invite her to play.

And so I played across Thailand and Malaysia, but I *only* played. We chatted over the drinks I bought, and matched wits until they realized I wasn't interested in anything additional. Those women appear more vividly in my mind than any backpacker I met during that trip, and with each one, each game, I traveled farther and farther from Nga, and she from me. Until my money was gone. Then I returned to the East Coast. Then the five years of college, the first job, the lateral moves between firms, apartments, and relationships in the city. I travel when possible, but I always plan too much for too short a time. Meanwhile, the metabolism slows.

Instead of meeting friends at the bar, I go home and sketch the bicycle, its easy, familiar geometry. I put down the pen, rub my forehead, pick the pen up. On fresh paper, I make the maw of the roadside bar as wide as the page, deepen the space. Rather than add the tables and games, I begin to fill it with ovals for faces—people, I mean. I adorn them with a Windsor knot, a nose ring, a bindi; I draw myself, three tiny curves for my slicked-over hair. Nga is near the left wall with arms posed overhead. Mom is the one waving, father with a cocked brow. Despite the little differences, for all of our mouths we have short dashes. For all our differences, each person's eyeholes are waiting for someone to color them in.

C

The first morning that the kids kicked barefoot through the clover fields, only Missy saw the four leafs. For her siblings, they were a needle in a haystack but for her they were stars pricked against the sky at night. She didn't brag; she plainly said "Found you" to each one lifted from the normals. Her siblings watched, increasingly aware of the green at their own feet. After the first day of searching they told her, "You aren't just lucky, Missy, you're good."

"You think?" She hadn't thought of it like that.

Standing on a kitchen chair, she emptied her pockets onto the table. "You found all of those? Let's preserve them," her mother said. Ignoring the others returning for dinner, they pressed the clovers shut in Encyclopedia Book C.

Weeks passed and Missy covered over *Coonskin*, *Croquet*, *Czechoslovakia* with damp green leaves. She barely had to climb the fence into the field, smiling in her aloofly pretty way, before four leafs appeared there. And there. Her siblings tried ripping and parsing handfuls from the dirt, they took large silver forks into the fields. They held rare successes up to the late-afternoon sun, but Missy had already moved onto D.

One morning, as the others hurried for stretches untouched by their sister, Missy stopped only a few yards beyond the fence. She saw and picked a strange clover with two leafs, one fatter than the other. By the time the others trudged back for lunch, she hadn't

moved. Her neck was bent, hands pressed into her chest as if she were holding a flightless bird.

They rushed to her, kneetops and pads of feet sunlit as they ran. “What do you got, Missy?”

She’d cupped the discovery seeing them approach, but slowly she lowered her hands.

“Did it just lose one?” she asked.

“No,” they said. They were experts in three leafs. “That’s the way it always was.”

They looked up from the clover to Missy.

One of them laughed. “If four is lucky, and three is normal, then you know what two is?”

“Dumb?” Missy asked.

“Cursed.”

“Cursed,” they repeated, then they started to laugh it, howl it, running from Missy as quickly as they’d come. The word stuck in her mind after they’d slid the screen door shut behind them. She shook her head and searched until dinner for another two-leaf to cancel out the curse. Then, once the house lights had blinked off at night, Missy slipped back into the fields, using the stars and moon for her torch. Eating their cereal, her siblings saw Missy return. A plastic grocer’s bag was balled in her fist. They shouted to their mother their weird sister had snuck out and look here she came. They warding her off with crossed fingers as she was sent to her room.

She checked Book C—flipping to *Clover*, pushing to *Curse*—but any answers there had been blotted out by the chlorophyll. She checked Ti-Tz, but no entry for *Two*

leaf existed. She'd hoped to find that plucking it from the earth would actually bring her some reward, like removing the thorn from the lion's paw. But there was nothing.

By the end of August, their mother demanded the school work they'd neglected get done. The kids copied cursive letters, practiced last year's math, threw their heads back in boredom. Missy tried to think, but two spread pages were a reminder of the curse.

On the final night of summer, Missy begged her mother to let her pitch the tent in the backyard. It seemed a final, vain attempt to keep vacation alive, and her mother disallowed it. Missy trumped toward her room, the Cheshire grins of her siblings peeking through doorways. "I hate all of you, too," she wailed. She cried in bed but her ears stayed listening until the house silenced. She crawled from the bed, to the open window, and stepped onto the flat copper roof. A bat flew over her shoulder, shrilling into cloudless night. The wildness, the new height excited her, and looking upward she tried to lift her ribs and arms to the dark sky, as if it would let down its wings.

Tucked into her denim shorts was her diary. She plopped onto the cool metal and smiled at the two leaf she had preserved inside. Wisps of branches lay at her feet, broken by storms. She scavenged for a thin and supple one. She looked one last time at the fragile clover, dipped her head toward her shoulder, and pressed the two-leaf to the hole of her ear. Grasping the stick, which easily followed the bends in the passageway, she forced it into her head.

Homestay

His name was Alejandro, except he was from Seoul, flying over with twenty-four other South Koreans who'd be split amongst the town's willing or needy. The college exchange program was a three-week dry run, so the commitment for the homestay was low. In his *Hello, Benjy and Eric* email, he apologized for his bad English despite using the words "gracious" and "introvert." He said while his name might seem odd, he'd already spent a year living in Cartagena, so he was accustomed to being abroad as Alejandro. In his P.S. he asked if we could lend him a car, even though this was against the rules. It's our secret, we wrote back, sitting at the kitchen table.

Moths pinged against the bulbs overhead, our three-walled kitchen letting them come and go. Spring peepers chirruped in our fields some twenty feet from where we sat. I reminded Eric we'd have to put down the 2x4s to dissuade the snakes from crossing and laying up on the tile. The brief winter had been cooler and damper than usual, and now that everything was warm they would stretch out like beach bums.

"Is there anything special we need to do for Alejandro?"

"We need to stoke the fires," I said, an embarrassing thing for a man nearing sixty to say.

"You're such a dope," he said, smiling warmly. He pushed himself from the table.

"I'll lay the 2x4s."

I went upstairs, opened all the front and back windows of our bedroom. Then we made love.

Our home is located along a blindly-turning rural road less than a half hour from the community college. Two other houses are in sight but not earshot. The driveway is a blight—long and straight and gravel—on what’s otherwise an artist’s pallet of color. Three full-grown magnolias, taller than the house, shadow three circles of our Kentucky bluegrass. Clipped cherry blossoms lay a pink carpet over the flagstone walk I set when we first moved here twenty-two years back. The porch is walled with trellises that shackle against the wind with budded ivory and burgundy roses. And lavender clusterblooms of pennyroyal keep the mosquitos away if we laze out front on the swing.

The two-story home is a backwards “L,” the few rooms bright and generous in space. Behind the oak door and brass knocker is the sitting room, a collection of three antique rocking chairs Eric inherited from his mother and a designer leather couch—my choice. Through the doorway is the kitchen, whose wide jade tile transitions directly to the grass of our backyard. When we expanded from garden to farm, we also tore down the exterior wall to adopt an Old World style—Spanish courtyards, that type of thing—trading the AC and Pine-Sol scent for breeze of dill or melon. Some mornings I put one foot in the dew and the other on the cool tile and I eat my toast, filling with light.

Three acres of different crops make up the view out back. In the colder seasons, we grow the leafy-topped carrots, potatoes, and parsnips. Brussel sprouts and spinach prove the most fickle, no matter what we do. A rotation of peas, peppers, and onions in the warm weather. For fruit, we plant tomatoes and, far beyond the fields, pear and paw-

paw trees, but also cantaloupe and watermelons, which this time of year take on weight—among other things—quickly.

But the most important for a guest, I suppose, is the bedrooms. You ascend the steps to a porch that extends the whole exterior of the home. The master sits above the sitting room and the guest over the kitchen; both have windows that open to the smells of everything happening below, but also the sounds of so much life.

When the program coordinator inspected the property, he joked, “You’re not going to put him to work?”

“The bees and the wind do the real work,” we said.

We entered into the cave of a cafeteria twenty minutes before 8pm, overdressed for the trays of chocolate chip cookies, brownies, and decaffeinated coffee. The other early-bird, a lady in scrubs with her young daughter, was pestering the program coordinator, Preston Mertz, until he pointed to us as an escape.

He’d been enthusiastic about us as sponsors since we could relate to “sticking out.” A candid statement, we’d thought, but he’d grown up here and would’ve seen us weaving into the fabric of the town. We’d volunteered for church events, gathered litter along the roadsides, and started the local farmer’s market. Along the way, we delighted in the deaths of a few horseshit citizens. It’s how a cat, in a house full of dogs, slowly expands the shared territory—a cat that can savor its daring.

“Already problems. Confusion picking them up at the airport,” Preston said, dabbing at his collar with a napkin. “Hey, we’re clear that payment is *after* the first week, right?”

“Not a problem,” we said.

“Wonderful,” he sighed.

His phone shone a rectangle through his grey slacks, but he made sure to shake our hands. “You’re one of the good ones,” he said before backpedaling.

I steered Eric by the elbow toward the woman, watching her daughter play on a smartphone. Melanie, her voice scratchy from cigarettes, said she was hosting because of the money but also her five-year old daughter might benefit from a different type of human around.

“You look about as nervous as Preston,” I laughed. Eric tapped the steel-toe of my boot.

“How can you not be? You’re welcoming strangers into your house,” she said and stroked her daughter’s blonde ponytail. “Are you two friends?”

We nodded.

“Oh. *Oh*. Sorry, I just...” She fluttered a hand in front of her face. “So. Why are you two adopting, or you know.”

“Sure, sure,” Eric said. His face turned serious and his voice dropped so he’d have intrigue or the tone of confession in whatever words he’d prepared. “To have an outsider find us fascinating instead of what we feel like: duller than dust.”

This was an exaggeration, although Eric and I found ourselves reminiscing more about our wilder days when we used to let the old, dollar-dropping men get most of what they wanted from us in exchange for their gifts, their hosted parties.

Melanie laughed a throaty, man's laugh. The daughter hopped away to get cookies, skipping the line. Her mother saw it and shot from the table to reposition the girl behind the men and women in business casual.

"Have a child. It'll buy you years of entertainment," she said, returning.

"But entertainment's just a distraction," I said. "A kid might cover over the bad parts of your personal life without helping a dang thing."

"Be nice," Eric said.

"I don't think so. You're raising a human being. It's good...I want to call it...productive work," Melanie said, gesturing outward.

Taking Eric's hand in my, I rested them on the table.

"Based on all the positions we tried in our younger days, if there was a way to get pregnant, one of us would've found it."

Eric, half-horrified, removed his hand. Melanie snorted.

"I needed that laugh," she said, circling her neck until the crack. "Won't they just get here already?"

At 8:20, the cafeteria doors opened. The twenty-four of them shuffled across the shabby floor and stopped in front of us all, turning to our inscrutable faces as if it were a police lineup. Toward the end of the tight-skinned but baggy-eyed group was our Alejandro, who'd tipped us off as being the tallest and oldest, 180 centimeters and 21 years young. The cafeteria applauded as instructed. Then, Preston began to call the Koreans and the name of their host to come forward.

Some hosts awkwardly bowed, some shook hands, but Alejandro lowered his duffel bags and mashed us into a hug, my nose hitting Eric's forehead. There was laughter, Melanie cheered us loudly, and in the end I think we somehow came off looking the most natural.

We three chatted easily throughout the cafeteria meet-and-greet and car ride. Excitement is high, Alejandro said about seeing his new house. He had the option of staying elsewhere; they'd stressed the various irregularities of our home environment, but since he was accustomed to millions of people surrounding him, he thought being so close to nature would be a good challenge. Like camping.

"Anything you need from us," Eric said once we'd showed him to his room. "Just think of us like uncles."

"The fun uncles," Alejandro corrected.

That night, Eric and I lay in bed, just getting under the blankets. The air was dusky. Either I was smelling the budding paw-paw trees or anticipating them. I thought about Alejandro smelling it, wondering about the new edges of life. I said I was impressed with his instant ease—"fun uncles" and the rest.

"We got the most mature. We'll take good care of him."

We discussed the time zone difference—how impossible he'd find it to sleep—the strange sensations of America—the new bed. Two strange men in a house that was half wild. We worked ourselves up until Eric rolled on top of me. In the dark, his lips were a shock—young and full.

I was stronger; I held his arms, rolled him under me. I had always been proud of having him, a few years younger, the bluer eyes and sharp face, the bigger brain and thinner body. My little twink again.

We didn't hold back, we didn't cover each other's mouth, even if our eyes tracked back in search. That whole time, we knew Alejandro could guess what was happening behind the closed door and we were so excited.

We prefer not to kill. When we'd first remodeled, we plugged in frequency emitters to repel the creepy-crawlers, but they adjusted to the sounds. Red tails nest atop telephone poles along the interstate and snakes coil into exhaust pipes for naps, so I guess it's no surprise. We lost wars with carpenter ants, cut down a few harboring trees. Installed a pair of female cats to police the mice.

We've learned to stop fidgeting when a bee lands on our arm; we look at it with warmth and curiosity why it might've chosen here, us. Nights the moths and gnats dive to the lights so we distract them with two stadium-grade 500 watters I happily mounted on the roof ridge. The gophers dig holes and Eric is obliged to fill them. It's like having little children, I guess: we get angry when the squirrels steal ripe tomatoes off the vine, and now we know to squirrel-proof it for next time.

The melons left us little choice. The leafy vines keep the soil moist, and the pregnant fruits crater a nice space in the earth. Black Widows like to crawl to the undersides. This happened the third or fourth year we tried melons—they were thriving, we were thrilled—but when harvest time arrived, eight dark legs crawled from the first one I lifted. I slapped the spider off my hand, chest thumping. I kneeled and nudged a

second watermelon, a few translucent black bodies rushing out. I shook one off my sandal before it could get any farther. Turns out the backyard was full of potential murderers. Armed with the hose, I booted the melons like soccer balls and sprayed down every last one, trying to drown the spiders. These days, we portion off a far corner of the field for them. There've even been years—when the spiders are particularly fertile—that we just let the melons sweeten and rot. Then the flies come, then the crows, and the field goes black.

It was at the end of the week that we heard Alejandro scream for help. Eric had doled out the meat and sides and poured him a glass of tea before taking his walk. I'd climbed the steps for an evening nap. We left Alejandro in solitude with his thin textbooks and dinner, and if he wanted to chat afterward we were more than willing.

When I heard the scream, I hurried downstairs. Alejandro was braced in the sitting room doorway as if for an earthquake.

“Bug,” he eventually spat out, pointing to the cabinet.

An especially hairy millipede spread on the top plate, its antennae flexing. I tried to drag Alejandro to show him there was nothing to fear.

“Kill it.”

“Well, we don't really do that. We do what's called a catch and release.”

I lifted the white plate from the stack and the legs bristled. The sight of one so close used to send chills through my body, too, I told Alejandro. Instead of going into the grass, I angled the plate under the sink faucet. We watched him shoot down the drain, contorting.

“Now we can be sure he won’t come crawling back,” I said.

Alejandro wouldn’t let me go upstairs. We sat and waited for Eric to return, the three of us eventually eating dinner together in the comfort of the sitting room.

“But Alejandro, they’re just bugs,” Eric said after I told him the story. “Humans are much scarier.”

“Humans I like.”

“Bugs are living things just like humans. What would makes them so bad?”

Alejandro slurped a spoonful of chicken and gravy. He cleared his throat without looking up at either of us. Ignoring us.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to say,” I told Eric.

“No,” Alejandro said. “I just don’t like bugs. The feeling happens here.” He flattened a large hand across his chest.

“But that’s why you picked us,” Eric said, getting up from the rocking chair. “Real country life. Here’s your chance to learn and grow in a different style of life. Tell you what, take off your socks, let’s go for a short walk along the fields.”

The kid sunk further into the leather sofa, scratching at his legs.

“Ignore him, Alejandro. Eric forgets how long it took us to assimilate. Him especially. He screamed over caterpillars, and he still can’t stand wasps.”

“I’m no Tarzan, Benjy’s right. It took some time. But it’s just a matter of exposure.”

Alejandro laughed uncomfortably. “I think I have a lot to experience already in a short time.”

The next day, to help him feel safer, I sealed his windows. I put out black plastic traps in the corners and we gave him peppermint and cayenne to sprinkle at gaps, like under doors, to dissuade bugs from crossing. He took his meals to his room, after asking our permission, and of course we said yes. He did his work, the entrances shut tight and scented. This didn't bother us; his comfort was most important. Morning would come and we three would laugh at the breakfast table over sugary coffee and eggs before I drove Alejandro to the college.

For all of his aversion to bugs, Alejandro loved the drive through country to school. He watched the grassy bellies of hills and roadside stream shining bare to the new sun. He stared out the entire drive, and his smile, it seemed to me, was the type he wasn't aware of.

The morning we encountered the deer in the road, I saw it first and stopped at a distance. Its side was split, not just bleeding but the guts vomited onto the blacktop.

"Shoot," I said. "Shoot."

I put the car in park and flipped on the 4-ways. Alejandro asked if it was alive. The steam rose from its belly and its neck thrashed as if it'd heard. He made a sad *oh* of surprise.

The vehicle idling, I got out. There was a shovel in the bed, used for soil or mulch runs. Or once every few years when something hesitated in the headlights. The passenger door creaked open and Alejandro stared at me from the other side of the bed. A strap of his maroon bookbag slipped from his shoulder. His mouth was slightly open.

I waved him to the tailgate where the cautions blinked.

“What’s the biggest animal you’ve ever killed?”

He laughed out of shock. A car he was riding in had hit a dog in the country once.

“Well,” I said. “Someone hit this thing. Just not good enough. So...”

I nodded to my shovel and pressed my hand softly against the side of my face.

“This won’t be pretty. You might want to stay here and direct any cars.”

“I want to see.”

“Yeah? Would you like to do it?”

“No, no. Just to see.”

We walked around the thing so it wouldn’t watch us, but its nose still worked. It scratched a few inches toward the roadside, the back quarters already dead and dragging. More mess poured onto the road. The first time I’d had to do this was our first year living here. Had the same shovel but a different truck, which Eric was driving when he struck the deer. Back then, some of the bar patrons didn’t know how to treat us (even if the bartenders did), and we often drank at home before cruising the countryside, still able to pretend like we were far-flung tourists. But Eric nailed the tail of a doe, spun the truck through a ditch into a field. That we’d survived was enough, I thought, drunker than him. Eric, in tears, wouldn’t listen. He ran to check on the animal while I went no further than the hot, purring hood. His nose was red and running when he returned, and he said he didn’t want it to suffer.

“I got the shovel in the back.”

“Can you?” he asked.

Before I ran away to the city, I’d grown up on a farm. I’d seen my brothers kill a fair share of things. It was what you did.

With the first strike, I made the mistake of bringing the shovel down across the long neck. This type of blow only gave it a surge of adrenaline, and I had to swing the shovel like a baseball bat to knock the beast back to the ground. Then I did it right, flattening the skull with repeated blows. There is the sound of an animal whimper simultaneous with crunched bone, teeth, and the squish of fluid under sudden pressure. Neither of us talked until we were home, drinking hot tea in our then-enclosed kitchen. Nights like these will be the worst of it, we agreed. Yet here we are, a little bit stronger, wiser.

As I killed this deer with two blows, I noticed Alejandro take a step closer. The sound runs under your skin to the core. I told him this was not normal for people to do, but it was better than leaving it.

“Mercy,” he said in his solemn baritone. What a word to know.

“I wouldn’t presume to call myself merciful,” I told him once we were back on the road. “Just nice.”

We wound our way through the campus drive to the main building’s doors. Four Koreans were smoking in a circle among normal students, everyone laughing.

“That’s more like it, huh?” I said. “Have a good day.”

One evening, we broke our usual routines, and went upstairs together while Alejandro ate dinner and studied on his laptop. As we returned, descending the steps, Alejandro watched us with his jaw set. He turned the screen toward us, the email was our own, saying he could borrow our vehicle. We’d forgotten. We laughed. Why so formal,

of course you can, we said. I tossed the truck keys to him. After seeing me with the deer, there wasn't anything he couldn't handle on the road.

Like the parents we never had, we waited up but without judgment. Even if he was tearing up a field somewhere as his electroshock music came through my truck speakers, his little escapes were what we wanted and missed. They were the townspeople's purposely averted glances we didn't elicit anymore.

Besides, over the following nights, Alejandro was all too ready to share what he'd been up to. He called us to say cows were in the road—so many cows! He abandoned the car to run and touch a patch of black hide. “Be careful,” Eric said into the phone, resting between the two of us on the bed. “It's good luck to lick it,” I said. He grabbed the phone away, frowned at me, hesitated before saying, “Yes, lick it.”

Another time he showed a video of him petting a horse, come to greet him at a fence's edge. Or a massive blinking red light of the radio tower photographed from halfway up. The night he scaled the tower, his hands red and lips chapped from the wind, we asked him why this boyish country fun when he could be doing so much more.

“There's no childhood in Korea—only school. Once I started fifth grade I had classes from eight in the morning to ten at night.”

“Benjy would've never survived. I, on the other hand, would've loved it.”

“No one can love it. The competition, the stress. But college—these are our years to be a kid.”

“With none of the innocence,” I said.

“With none of the innocence,” Eric repeated.

We all listened to a barn owl hooting and then descending from the roof before Alejandro declared he was taking his innocence back. We applauded him. Freed of people for long enough or in a new land, it seemed possible. The world resurprised you. Don't limit it to just college, we encouraged. For the rest of your life! Alejandro stopped to sweep kisses to us and the imagined audience. He climbed the steps for bed and we clapped harder. Our own hands able to overcome the rest of the world's noise.

The night before the final group dinner at the school cafeteria, we made Alejandro whatever his heart desired from our cellar reserves and the butcher. I set on the table two bottles of wine and a liquor called soju that he'd been saving for us. The night and buzz of insects and our laughter was the ambience.

Alejandro bid us begin by picking up the ounce of mystery drink he'd poured us.

We toasted to him and he toasted to us and we toasted to each other.

"It's a good and sad flavor," Eric said, smacking his lips. "The memory of sweetness."

I poured another round, and we followed Alejandro's example with the salute, "Gonebae."

Bowls of gnat-luring French onion soup were handed out. The gruyere was so thick on top that Eric warned Alejandro not to slurp it loudly and quickly like they did in his country.

"What are you going to tell South Korea about us two?" Eric asked.

"Very generous. The very best hosts."

"Oh, but your pals, what stories will you tell them," I said.

“Maybe freakier ones.” Eric winked at me across the table.

“Ah, yes. Definitely,” he said, turning red. I supposed it was only partially the alcohol in his Korean blood.

“We will miss you, Alejandro,” I said, poking a spoon through the cheese.

“Yes, me too.”

“We won’t let you go!” Eric said. He dropped to his knees and clung to Alejandro’s legs. We laughed and we laughed until I smelled the burgers on the grill. Alejandro needed to pee already and I told him just to follow me out to the grass.

“There is a type of—” he rubbed his chin, looking for a word. “A very tiny—like an insect too small to see that lives in the jungle. When you pee into the river, it swims up and in.”

“All the dangerous things out here you can see clear enough.”

“I prefer to be safe,” he said, putting his hand on the railing of the steps.

From the grill, I called for something larger than a fork to flip the meat but Eric had disappeared, probably a run to the gentleman’s room himself. I used a couple of twigs instead and topped the burgers with cracked pepper and sea salt. Something like a scream came from upstairs, behind me. I called if everything was okay, then Eric’s name, even though it hadn’t been his voice. I stood, sensing for any movement between the two bedroom doors until jogging up myself, knowing the burgers would burn.

I met Eric at the threshold of our bedroom. “Was that Alejandro?” he asked.

We found Alejandro cowering in a squat on his bed. All three lights flooded the room with an artificial brightness. The corners were illuminated and the green comforter

lifted so nothing touched the floor. His eyes fixed on the bathroom door, a towel wedged at the crack underneath.

“No,” he called out as I approached it.

I ignored Alejandro’s extravagant fear. Pushing the door slightly open, I saw nothing unusual: the tub and stretched curtain, the toilet and vanity, two of three bulbs above the mirror had burned out sometime during the stay. The only working light shined on the tub, the rest of the room shadowed. I opened the door further and heard the bed groan. Eric pressed against me to see in, and we crept further, studying the wall and ceilings.

“There’s nothing,” we called back to Alejandro. He looked aggrieved, as if he had to tell us an unfortunate truth. He swallowed and led us back into the bathroom.

“*Gonbae*,” Eric encouraged, and I don’t know why but it sounded so right.

Alejandro pulled back the curtain. In the tub were streams of black widow baby spiders shuttling from the drain, up the lip, approaching the walls. Hundreds.

“Amazing,” we said.

The mother was half poised in the drain, like a tarantula in its hole. Its dime-sized body darker than the crawling, translucent children.

With a hand pushing each of Alejandro’s tensed shoulders, we inched closer. A few miniscule widows glided along the ceiling.

“We’re not going to touch them,” Eric cooed.

“Just look at them and let them be,” I echoed.

Alejandro quaked in our palms. When the baby spiders paraded over the single light, the room seemed to tremble, everything threatened to go dark. Eric sealed the sink

drain, took another towel and kicked it against the closed door as I steadied Alejandro with an embrace from behind.

“Just two minutes,” I said to Alejandro. “I’ve got you.”

Eric laid both hands on my shoulder. He whispered the same words into my ear and then bit.

Alejandro screamed and we corralled him to the floor, clung to him like our child. I smelled the onion and alcohol in his sweat while the lines of spiders zigged over the walls, guided by instinct for cracks and exits. They have no venom, we told him; they can’t bite, we said. The one remaining light bulb fizzled, the room blinking into night. We wouldn’t do anything less—or anything more—than hug and reassure Alejandro.

“You’ll be changed,” we said. “Now tell us thank you.”

My Mother, *La Curandera*

This is a story about my mother, a *curandera* or shaman, so of course it begins with a dream. I am standing on the manicured football pitch of Estadio Monumental, wearing the snug cream colored shorts and jersey of Universitario. The first time I had this dream I was twenty, and had been recently named starting striker for La U, though it would reoccur throughout my twenties and early thirties and only now that I've finished my athletic career and returned to the jungle has it stopped. The stadium is empty, the towering lights tint the grass neon, and around me are white tables and chairs set across the pitch like at an elegant reception. I move from one table to the next, looking at each spot's card but none match my name. Then I turn around to see my mom sitting alone. She's wearing her customary green cotton skirt, a white t-shirt her dark shoulders show through, and her waterproof combat boots. Her grey hair is brittle and flat as always. I'm surprised to see her because she hates Lima, can tolerate only a day's visit, but she is nonetheless a model of serenity.

After glancing at my black socks and cleats, I look up to find her table filled with people, the stadium has crowded its 80,000 seats, and our fanatics behind the far goal are singing, swaying drunkenly in unison. That's more like it, I think, and jog to bow to the fans. But as I'm approaching the other end, I realize that this is a celebration of my death, and if I don't die here and now, I'll disappoint them. The idea overwhelms me and I take

a knee, breathing heavily. A waiter brings me a Coke. The dream ends as I bury my head into my jersey, afraid to look up.

After a few reoccurrences I told my father, a dentist but also a good interpreter of dreams. He first asked what my mother represented to me. “She is devout, respected, and takes terrible care of her hair.” As for the football stadium, I told him it was the place where I expressed my talent and personality, where I could compete—not against an opponent—but against myself, concentrating on the game plan, anticipating teammates’ actions and needs so we eleven men move together as one body, one goal. He didn’t interpret the dream so much as twist it into a warning: Don’t quit football, he said, until you’ve found something meaningful to take its place.

My mother began studying plant medicine with her father, a *curandero* himself. A woman shaman is uncommon, but because the secrets and intelligences of the *curanderos* are normally passed from generation to generation, and my grandfather suddenly found himself widowed as a result of the childbirth, this was one of those cases in which no one would think twice about his daughter, *la curandera*.

This is the primary difference between her life and mine. Or in her parenting and my grandfather’s parenting, which wasn’t parenting so much as a life-long apprenticeship. The day never arrived when my mother stared into my eyes and said, Today you must choose: *curandero* or not. Some would say this is the most generous act she ever performed, to give me a vast selection of possible lives rather than hers in a jungle village, a ninety-minute speedboat ride from the nearest supermarket. But I wasn’t

so sure, and I'm still unsure, even as I see my jerseys and national team photos that my father has hung on the blue concrete walls.

A six-kilometer footpath behind our house led to her *campamento*, a scattering of thatched-roof huts, some with wooden bunks under mosquito nets, the largest two for ceremony and cooking. When I was very little, my mother and I would chat about the happenings at home, about my friends, while we searched for the plants to heal her clients. Ramón is a lovely fool, she'd say in the same breath as, This is *ajo sachó*, This is the *chacapa* bush I made my rattle from, This is the hour when snakes won't bother you. I would watch her cut, harvest, and then boil the roots or leaves back in the camp's kitchen while the clients read in hammocks or sat cloistered in their huts. They came for a night, a week, six months, according to their disorder and bank account, to have their laziness or anxiety removed, the demons of irascible stomachs and alcohol dependency cleared. She attracted a mostly middle-aged crowd, some of whom brought me expensive gifts against her wishes, the most prized being my PlayStation and FIFA game.

This didn't stop me from disliking some clients—the first-timers more than any other. Many spoke little Spanish but still grumbled on arrival about paying a few hundred dollars to a kid, watching football. An especially fat Russian, Max, appeared one summer day, quick to point to our computer and large television, as if our conveniences had anything to do with the healing he'd receive from my mother. In these situations, I asked for only a quarter of the total cost. Max slashed his hand in front of his neck before handing over the *soles*. No más, he said. On the path, he complained, and I had to wait while he sat for rest. I clapped my hands to hurry him up, saying “ten minutes more,” every kilometer, until he swiped at me like you would a fly. After two weeks with my

mother, he returned and paid his bill without complaint. More remarkable was his smile, like a petting hand, as he watched me count out correct change. I was slow to give it to him, sad to feel him leave. I offered to accompany him down to the moorings where the speedboats waited even though the town was only ten blocks wide.

As I approached my teenage years, I hung around my mother's *campamento* less and less. I only asked her help in order to stop my daydreaming during dribbling exercises or heal my body from small injuries. Seated beside her in the darkness of the communal hut, I would drink her remedy and listen as she performed the *icarros*, songs of healing. Depending on the type of plant medicine others drank, there could be screaming, weeping. But I never wept. A true *curandero* heals the body through the soul, and this spiritual burden is lighter on a kid, who hasn't broken hearts or been brokenhearted, who hasn't really battled and been defeated by guilt. My mother would stand before the suffering man or woman, light her thick *mapocho*, and baptize them with the smoke from her mouth. She would massage their scalps, along their nose and forehead until they calmed and let the medicine work through them.

This was the nature of her calling. But that she spent more nights with her clients than in our concrete house, that she was powerful and revered as a *curandera* meant that as a mother she was ignorant and removed.

So I made football my mother.

There was only one ceremony she ever forced me to undertake. It was my fourteenth birthday and I was a man, or at the gateway to manhood. She told me that I was ready for the appropriate journey, one that her father had sent her through, even

though she was a woman. She took me deep into the jungle to show me the flowering bush I'd be communing with. Because the *toé* is in bloom, it is weaker, she said, So I harvested the leaves days ago.

The white flowers were lovely, long and downward facing trumpets, tinged pink at the opening. She didn't mention how dark its power was, that every part, even the flowers, was poisonous, capable of hallucinations, amnesia, temporary insanity.

I was taken to a clearing in the jungle, the ghostly screech of a toucan somewhere nearby. My mother placed tobacco in a shell, lit it, and fanned the smoke up and down my body. She chanted a prayer and left me with a water-filled gourd. Over the ensuing hours, I lost consciousness, regained it. Sounds approached and retreated, my skin crawled and wings flapped. The jungle seemed alternatively to be stalking and guarding me, and I staggered off through the brush. When I wished to return to the clearing and water, my father appeared from behind a tree. He seemed slightly hunched in his dentist's jacket, and he kept his left foot hidden behind the other, as if he was shy or breaking some rule. Let's get you back to safety, he said. Lead the way, I told him. As he turned, I saw his foot and shin were terribly twisted, like a vine, and I was reminded of my mother's story about the *chullachaqui*, the imp who appears as a family member to those searching in the jungle. For those who are ready to know themselves, it leads them to safety and for those who are not, it drives them into the jungle's maddening depths. The imp was a spirit of the Invisible World my mother spoke so often about, a world she always seemed to half occupy, and which we only occasionally understand through the appearance of rainbow halos around the sun, northern breezes, a jaguar glancing at you from a pool of water, or—once we've evaded all other signs and whispers—our dreams. I

threw myself to the dirt and insects on the jungle floor and closed my eyes. I shouted until the voice of my father stopped.

I knew a day had passed when my mother arrived with another cup of *toé*, and a new gourd of water. I blinked hard up at her sticky grey hair blocking out what little light of dawn filtered through the canopy. She said, Son, you are a great being in the world. Love is to listen to others first, yourself second. Bravery is to know when this is false. Then she slapped me on my bare chest and made me drink. With her sitting beside me, preparing the tobacco to cleanse the air, I was joyful to be surviving, strengthening. Then she left and the *toé* began to bleed my sanity as before.

After the third night, she came with a thermos. She guided me to a stream where I cleaned myself—I stunk of shit and felt the red scales of the *aguaje* fruit under my fingernails and cutting my gums, though I had no memory of eating anything. On the walk back, she stopped at a small bush and cut at sinewy roots with her bowie knife. I realized she would prepare something to conclude the ceremony. Gnaw on this for a while, she said, holding out a root chip. I did as I was told, and the bitterness actually helped to soothe my stomach. She handed me the thermos. Now you can digest your father's soup, she said. I smelled vegetable broth, the sweetness of tomatoes. After drinking so quickly that I coughed, I asked wasn't there an official end to the ceremony. The ceremony marks a becoming, she said. Which you continue every day.

Even in the years before the ceremony, I begged my parents for better football competition. Our village was modest, and I had to play against the teenagers for a real challenge. After some debate, my mother and father decided that I would go to the jungle

city of Iquitos for school and sports, the most significant decision they ever made regarding my life.

While they were born and raised in the jungle, they'd both left for professional reasons. My father studied in Lima to learn the techniques for cleanings and whitening, metallurgic principles for the gold or silver amalgams he repaired or inserted. My mother was invited to Ecuador or Brazil, even the United States on rare occasion, to administer her own curative ceremonies for several weeks every year. Unlike my father, she needed no tools other than the plants collected from the jungle. For the trips where she'd be working with large groups, my father and I would help her pulverize lianas as thick as ropes, or leaves by the basketful, then apportion the powder in every little pocket of blue jeans so as not to be detected by airport security—exporting plant species being illegal. A few times, I dumped a bowlful of stinking liana into her suitcase and clapped it shut, expecting her to get caught. But there was never a problem. As some of the longtime clients used to joke, *Tiene las llaves, tu mama*. She has all the keys. It was true: there was no gate—not even death—she didn't smoothly pass through.

Every morning at six, I took the boat to Iquitos and returned twelve hours later. Because I slept on the trip, I could stay up late watching movies or more football with my father, eating the fish and rice he'd prepared, proteins and carbohydrates. He was the dutiful homemaker, hopeful for my future and honored to assist my mother's work. Most of my time was spent playing football, watching football, or playing football video games. I studied and emulated our countrymen, none more than Domingo Ponce who could spin a header so it changed direction midflight. Even when I was made to lead clients to and from the village, I dribbled a ball the entire trip, up and downhill, at dawn

or dusk, jogging or sprinting once I was alone. If you can exercise perfect control in those conditions, the flat well-lit field of a stadium is mundane.

The village and whole of Iquitos talked about me, the best young footballer the jungle had ever seen. A year after the *toé* ceremony, my mother tugged at a string in her web of clients to bring in a few scouts from an amateur club in Lima. They saw me score eight goals in a half, signed me, and three weeks later I moved across the country to begin my career.

Suddenly I was practicing against real talent, great potential, but my teammates partied at night and had trouble rising early for practice, or they snuck out of weightlifting on weekends. They rolled their eyes at the militaristic coaches, whose jugulars bulged while asking us if we understood the chance we were given. I hung on their every shouted tactic, noted each footstep, the width of their exaggerated stances. They lifted me up as an example to the others, said I was the most coachable player they'd ever seen. During games, I was the one shouting, *Te llegan*, as the defender crept up, or *Esquina, esquina!* when I was streaking free toward the corner. For these reasons, they awarded me playing time and I scored goals to prove their trust in me. Three years later I was signed onto La U.

The media didn't bother talking to me until injuries forced my debut. They crowded around my locker after the first game, in which I'd done nothing but look my age, getting pulled in the 24th minute. I gave the typical answers about learning from mistakes until they began to poke at my history. Is it true your mother is a shaman, a reporter asked. I told them that she was.

-So does her magic help you on the field?

A few of them were grinning.

-It's not magic. It's medicine. And it doesn't make you stronger or faster or more intelligent. Does that answer your question?

-So what does it do?

-It challenges you mentally. It builds character.

-Do you think football builds character?

They were chuckling.

-Football builds statues, I said, a quote that stayed with me until I buried it under enough goals.

I don't need to recount what happened from there—my fourteen decorated years with Universitario, rejecting richer offers from Argentinian or Italian League clubs, and the three appearances with our national team. After all, this story is for her.

I distinctly remember the cellphone call from my father. I had just met with the one and only Domingo Ponce, who asked me to be his assistant coach on the national team. It was an honor but not surprising. The media, my teammates and trainers, had predicted coaching as my future. I was patient enough to develop talent, wise enough to lead. I'd told Domingo I would sleep on it.

Six months earlier, I'd played my final game, taking Universitario to the finals—or maybe the quarterfinals. I only remember that I walked off the field to applause and defeat. Since then, I'd been enjoying my retirement thanks to the brick patio of Los Inkas country club and my favorite jungle fruit gelato, *camu camu*, responsible for my recent

weight gain. Rather than commit to something new, I played golf and dined at the club. The metallic *thwamp* of well struck golf balls was strangely soothing to me.

I answered my father's call, and he calmly said, Hello, son. Your mother is dead.

I stood and left the patio to the greens. My mother had never been ill, had never known what a sneeze was—my father always liked to tell the story of teaching her the word.

He explained how she had barely lifted herself from bed that morning, a weakness he'd never seen before. She'd laced up her combat boots and hiked toward camp, but he and some new arrivals had found her collapsed along the way. You shouldn't be in a rush to come, he said. You know your mother. She's not the type to flip-flop. She'll still be dead tomorrow, and the next day. His ability to talk so plainly about her, as if he'd found a flattened street dog on the roadside, was shocking to me. I told him I'd fly there immediately and said goodbye.

I asked for a drink at the bar before leaving. The bartender knew me and opened a Coke. I had never sat at a bar before, never in all of my years and successes. I'd reveled in victories alongside celebrities, politicians, and teammates at bars, but we sat at tables or the owners took us upstairs to private rooms where we would sign autographs and have photos taken to be hung on smoke-stained walls. The club's wooden walls were polished and bare, as if all of the members had good reasons for their faces to be displayed.

I walked to a booth and introduced myself to the pair of golfers eating French fries with beers. They didn't recognize me without the cleats on, they said. I chatted with them, bought them another drink. We took a photo on each of their phones before I

moved to another table. For the rest of the evening I moved from booth to table to bar, leaving everyone with a smile. Then I drove to my apartment, slept terribly, and flew home to the jungle the next morning. Two days later, my mother's wake, over which my father and I presided, had begun. In the ceremony hut, four small fires marking the cardinal directions were kept burning around her body. She was surrounded by the shells and skulls, crystals and perfumes of her ceremonial altar. Other *curanderos* appeared throughout the three-day wake, journeying from other parts of the Amazon, and some of her clients flew from abroad (my father had sent email after email) to say goodbye to my mother. The contrast of costumes that walked the circular path through her *campamento* was almost humorous: old men, bare chested and wearing their ceremonial headdress of blue and red feathers being passed by the Northface clothing of the gringos or Europeans.

On the final day, we carried her on a bed of palms into the clearing where I'd been introduced to manhood, and we burned her body at dusk. She was dressed in green and white, doused with rosewater, and flowers were laid over her torso. My father and I were to light the pile of wood layered underneath the altar. The smoke blew in my face but I was already crying.

When we stepped back into the circle of men and women, I glanced at the slowly blinking faces, illuminated by the thickening flames, and heard none of the insects or birds that I'd known as a child. It was a strange place, suddenly, but I felt as if these were not strangers.

In the days since then, I've returned to my father's house while he works long hours at his clinic. I won't stay in the *campamento* by myself. When I look at the drying leaves and jars of boiled lianas in the makeshift kitchen, when I hear the jungle still silent

except for the thud of an *aguaje* fallen to the ground, I only feel guilt. I think about how we cultivate it, collect the fruits and dump them at the feet of someone we love. But we don't want them to choke, we want them to find the tree and dig it up by the roots.

A few times I've dreamt that I've just woken from my reoccurring nightmare, but I don't actually see the white table and my mother sitting. I try to force myself into sleep and into the folds of the nightmare again, but I can't. Then I wake up. This is my life now: the confusion of waking within sleep, night within night. But, as I've seen in the eyes of those who knocked at our door, this is so many of our lives.

I play last year's FIFA game, selecting Peru's team. My rating is good, even though I'm old. It's mesmerizing to control me on the television, tear through the field like a madman, steal from Suarez or even from Messi, football Jesus. That I'll disappear from next year's game isn't a tragedy.

Someone knocks and I get up to open the door. A Peruvian, older and taller, once muscular but now a bit bulgy at the stomach and calves. He's wearing large sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat pulled low.

-La curandera? he asks.

-She's dead. I'm her son.

-I know she is, he says, and flashes a smile that's missing a few teeth. A smile I recognize.

-Domingo, I say. You're the last person I expected.

The joke was that he'd sold his teeth for the magic necessary to perform those headers.

He wipes at his forehead and asks to enter. Come in, I say.

Removing his hat and sunglasses, he sits on our old couch. Sorry to hear about your mother, he says. I never did that type of thing but I'm sure she was a powerful healer.

I tell him thank you as he pulls out a cigarette and lights it. I offer him a drink of water or soda, but he shakes his head.

-What are you still doing all the way out here? Not learning any of your mother's tricks, I hope.

-Me? Domingo, I'm like you. I'm a football player.

He points to the screen where our goalkeeper is cradling a ball to his chest, winning one-to-nil.

-This what you mean by football player?

He stares at me while tapping ash into a cup.

-Keeps my mind off things.

-You know I didn't fly and bus and boat to your door just so I could refuse a drink. I want you as my assistant and I need an answer. Your country needs an answer.

He turns off the television and waves me outside so he can finish his cigarette. He walks past the awning into the sunlight and turns. His arms are crossed, legs spread wide. His jean shorts reveal perfectly normal, straight legs and boots correctly parallel. I follow him as far as the doorway and lean against it.

"How about a short walk," he says.

I won't go another step.

This Ends with a Birthday

Marcel and Robyn had expected all and none of this. Four and a half years ago, when they'd moved the boys so Marcel could earn his doctorate, they'd already been saving for the fortune required by Luc's bright future. They'd known Danny's developmental issues would make a new school challenging. And a PhD in four years was no easy task. Privately, Marcel and Robyn had planned for how they'd manage the kids, his research, the finances. It wasn't ideal, but she would work first shift at the downtown café, returning home before the boys so Marcel could maintain his deep focus in the lab. Once he graduated, he'd have his pick of well-paying jobs and Robyn could throw her feet up if desired.

Now, only one semester beyond the original goal—an understandable delay—the dissertation was submitted, defended. Everyone was alive, on the uptick, and they weren't quite bankrupt. The blueprint realized.

And yet Marcel was still suffering from the migraines. Visual hallucinations causing little splotches over his shoulder. When they'd first appeared, they were intolerable. He had blinked, dilated, and clicked through every examination the optometrist could swivel him to: from the archaic colorblind book to the field of vision videogame. In the end, the specialist shrugged. "Considering the normal test results, and with your levels of stress, it's probably just neurological."

"Probably just?"

But over the past few months, Marcel was finding it easier to let the little distractions be. If it was simply migraines, then it was the rare sort of problem that wouldn't fester if he ignored it. The headaches were minor; he had been hampered only while in the lab on too little sleep, or writing the dissertation—also on too little sleep, which he adjusted for by over-caffeinating. The self-neglect only made the splotch pulse. In this way, the intermittent hallucinations could actually improve his life, catalyze sensible decision-making that Robyn had precipitated during their twenty years together.

He returned home from his university office that night to onions and garlic sautéing. Robyn, wooden spoon in hand, her face flushed, hunched beside Danny. His acned cheeks ("pizza-face" was the terrible Americanism) were even redder.

He slipped around her toward the stove. She hip-checked him.

"I've got an eye on that."

"Remember, you don't need to do everything," Marcel said.

"Sorry, you're right," she said and kissed him on the lips.

Marcel sat with Danny—his exam a day away—and perused the sloppy factor trees: 16 branching off into 2 and 8; 8 into 2 and 4; 4 into 2's. Due to complications during birth, the doctors had said Danny would be "slow." Cognitively, he was likely to never fully mature, and what age he would ultimately "attain"—seven, thirteen, nineteen—and which abilities would flourish and which would never see sunlight, it was impossible to know. Imagine the dissonance, Danny's old psychiatrist warned them, when he sees his body maturing with everyone else's, except he might not be able to drive like the others, or understand what comes with having a girlfriend. Danny had grown up shy, clumsy, but good at pulling things apart—numbers, remote controls, push-

mower engines. Now, hormones were leading him along an even bumpier road. He appeared confused more often, restrained. But wasn't that puberty for everyone?

At Marcel's command, Luc stomped downstairs from his bedroom's exile. Normally Marcel and Robyn, sitting across from their boys, listened to Luc detail his plans to sweep the feet of various girls for the senior dance and, with less *élan*, the content of his day's classes. All of this information seemed like a screen pulled down to obscure a separate scheme or event—at least, since he decided to sneak into the Bio Lab, tie three formaldehyde-stiffened piglets around the ceiling fans of the teachers' second floor lounge and set them to "breeze." They had asked again and again, "Where did that *come* from?", and they wondered could they really know either of their sons, if behind Danny's guileless surface and Luc's oversharing there existed different boys.

Luc's arms were crossed. He hadn't touched his food. "It's inhumane," he declared.

"That is the idea of punishment," Marcel said through a mouthful of tofu. "Nothing will change if you refuse to eat."

"Why would I want to eat with you guys? I'd rather get my food in my room like a real prisoner."

"Don't start," Robyn said. "You've no idea how lucky you are that room arrest is the worst of the punishment."

"If someone'd told me this was the result of a couple of pig corpses..." Luc raised a forkful of rice to his eyes.

How unconcerned he seemed about this inflection point, the rise or fall of his future life, was maddening to Robyn and Marcel. It almost made them jealous that his

whole future could be salvaged by a week of in-school suspension and eighty hours of community service (and the bill for the pigs and hazmat cleaning).

“Keep complaining and see if you get your phone back,” Robyn said.

Luc raised a zucchini slice with his fork and closed his lips over it. After he swallowed a little rice, he nudged the plate toward his brother. Danny better centered the two plates and continued eating.

“Don’t you think that’s a poor idea?”

“Why?” Luc said. “You’ll eat it, won’t you Danny?”

It was a household joke that he was the dog of the house, willing to eat however much until it was gone. Robyn used to defend him from the insult, but reality overwhelmed her. On the night of Luc’s seventeenth birthday, Danny snuck the rich bakery cake and consumed it until he vomited chocolate over the kitchen floor.

“A smart decision,” Marcel said. “The brain is more effective on small quantities of food. So you’re primed to return to homework.”

Luc drummed on the table before leaving, whistled as he climbed the steps. Eventually, Danny moaned.

“I feel too full. Should I save the rest for Luc?”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Robyn said. “Cover it with another plate and put it in the refrigerator.”

Afterwards, between the boys’ academics and Robyn’s wish to unwind, the house was calmer. Robyn beckoned Marcel to the couch. When a voice shouted “Dad” or “Warden,” she offered to join, but he wouldn’t hear of it. Home should be a place to

relax. Before going to bed, he checked that Danny was asleep and Luc settling in. Marcel slid under the covers, kissed Robyn, and closed his eyes. Splotches appeared.

“Spots,” Marcel sighed.

“They’ll stop.”

“Maybe. But maybe I’m going crazy, Rob.”

“Going?” she yawned. “You’re already late to the party.”

It had started about six months ago. Robyn would return home after the café’s lunch rush, deposit the mail inside, and instead of napping, she would walk out the garage door, down the driveway and up the opposing driveway into the open garage. The neighbor was an early retiree, a timely investor in drones, and every other day he would peek his vintage white Porsche and his motorcycle just beyond the large doors to weightlift in the spartan confines. Marcel still excited her, but Robyn was convinced she needed the ritual of walking across the street where she could release her worry—a dumping grounds—before seeing her kids. Afterwards, she and the neighbor spent no more than ten minutes above the sheets, discussion plateauing at neighborhood observations or the Main Street events he organized. He was the one to end the two-month affair, afraid of the potential gravity. His brother had warned him, “Out of a relationship’s possible infidelities, sexual infidelity is just the first to occur. Not the ultimate.” He repeated this wisdom to Robyn as they sat on a padded weight bench. The statement struck down through her with the force of a spear or stake, and she felt herself straightening with its help. What those advanced infidelities were, she refused to

imagine—the joys of Danny, Luc, her daily interactions at the café or the chats with Marcel’s mother, suddenly reawakened for her, and she was grateful.

She confessed to Marcel immediately. She knew the clarity of her realization would diminish and the need for confession along with it. As she began to explain to him that night, Marcel leaned away, then rose from the couch. She grabbed at his hand and he pulled free. But he told her to continue. She described what she’d learned, what she didn’t want to have cleaved from her. By the time she finished, he had dropped to the floor, sitting cross-legged like a wearied monk, chin at his chest. He appeared as overcome as she had felt the day before, seated on the weight bench. Marcel was not a man of anger, but she sensed strains rushing from somewhere. A vein widened above his ear. What she hadn’t understood until then was just how pocked with disaster her future might be.

“Marcel?”

She hoped he understood it, too.

“It’s an impossible time for us,” he said, looking up to her. “And I know you’re actually the person who confessed the story, not the person in the story.”

In some ways, the flying pigs had been a blessing, Robyn thought. Luc’s fortunately victimless prank called for parental accord at a time when Marcel might’ve been most withholding. They couldn’t remain *lasseiz-faire*. The emotions stirred by the infidelity would take more than a few weeks to sift, but the crises of Luc and Danny unified them.

The next afternoon, Robyn listened to Luc's old, tank-like Volvo rumble into the garage. She set the table with hummus and carrots, a can of tuna and mayonnaise for Luc, who wanted the protein.

"Be careful with Mount Danny, mom," Luc said, entering the kitchen. He took the hummus and a spoon to the opposite end of the kitchen and hopped onto the countertop. "Should be interesting. I've never seen lava before."

"The test—" she said before the force of Danny's arms around her ribs made her cough. "Be gentle, please. Tell me what happened."

Danny spun and pointed at Luc.

"You told her."

"Did I tell you anything, mom?"

"He was just being his usual unappreciative self, Danny. Can't hug his mother—"

"That I'm eating should be enough," Luc said.

Robyn leaned against the fridge. "Kiddo," she said. "I could tell something's wrong by the way you squeezed my heart into my back."

Helped by a few prodding questions and chocolate inducements, Danny admitted he didn't finish the test in time. But also that someone said something about him at lunch—though further specifics became hopeless once he sat down and shouted "No." Robyn had just opened the fridge to look for another bribe, when Luc asked if it was Danny's smell or his zits the kids were talking about these days, and by the time she turned, the can of tuna fish was already cocked in Danny's hand. It dented the cabinet beside Luc's head.

“He’s the one you should lock up!” Luc shouted, already ducking into the living room. Danny sat back down, aware he’d crossed a line, saying, “It’s his fault, he shouldn’t make jokes.”

Both of them were sent to their rooms. She let Danny put his headphones on and disappear into his music; Luc was ordered to do schoolwork. She lay on the couch and considered how she could best help her boys. Step one, she decided: early dinner.

Marcel returned home shortly after the table had been cleared. On Tuesdays, he met his colleagues for a beer, and he was no later or earlier, Robyn was glad to notice.

“You’re all alone, everything’s washed,” he said, surprised, and sat on the arm of the couch.

“There are a couple of reasons.”

“I’m going to imagine good ones. The happy effect of the beer has not fully dissipated.”

She told him about the tuna fish, and how unresponsive both Danny and Luc had been throughout dinner. Marcel muttered there were worse ways to spend an evening than in quiet. After assessing the chunk of damage in the kitchen, he returned saying, “Maybe for Danny, Algebra is his peak. Even I—there are things I can’t understand.”

He raised his right arm above his head to establish a ceiling.

“Get out of school mode. It’s not about math.”

“You’re right. Probably hormones more than anything.”

“No. I mean, yes I think that, too. But I also think: are we just saying that to make ourselves feel better? Every morning I wake with this hope that I’m going to see him...”

“Mature?”

“No,” she said. “Confident. In control.”

“Do you really think we can do anything more for him?” he said.

“Well...”

He had been running a hand along her spine, but Robyn didn’t know for how long.

“So what’s Danny doing now—homework?” Marcel asked.

“Oh. He’s gone. They both are,” she said, knowing how dramatic it sounded but letting the effect settle. “I figured in some ways we’ve been too strong-handed with Luc and maybe not enough with Danny—socialization might be what he needs. So I let Luc go out with his friends, as long as he included Danny.”

Marcel lengthened his neck. “So you send our emotionally volatile son out with his delinquent brother.”

“Forgiveness, Marcel.”

“Don’t talk to me about forgiveness.”

She flinched and lowered herself to the floor. He rarely said anything sharply enough to make her eyes hot.

“I think we need to take back our free time,” she said. “We need to have sex, Marcel.”

“Oh,” he said, almost groaning. She asked if that was bad.

“No, no. It’s just sometimes I’m an idiot. I forget we need to be selfish with our time.”

“How can you be an idiot? You’re a doctor.”

“Is that honesty or sarcasm?”

“Both.”

He smiled. “Upstairs?”

“No, down here. We’ll hear them if they come back.”

Robyn’s cell phone rang, and they listened to it together, naked. When the ringing stopped but quickly restarted on Marcel’s phone, he answered.

“How long ago?...*Robyn*—”

She started dressing. “Not another fight?”

“Start over, Luc. I’m switching to the speakerphone.”

Luc, his voice wavering and fast, explained Danny had been sulking, complaining he didn’t like the music Luc and his friends were playing. Nineteen minutes and thirty-two seconds—that was the length of the record Luc put on after giving Danny the keys to wait in the Volvo. After that, he felt guilty and went out to check. The car was gone. He ran once around the block then came immediately inside and called. He didn’t know what else to do.

Marcel dressed while Robyn dialed 9-1-1. She gave the address of Luc’s friend’s house, and when they arrived, they saw the periwinkle two-story lit with exterior spotlights. Luc, his three friends, and the Sokols stood halfway between driveway and doorstep, as if unsure how complicit or willing to help they were expected to be. The police came, gathering everyone and their statements together, accumulating no more than what Luc had said over the phone. The Sokols were especially oblivious; they’d been in the living room but didn’t catch a revving engine or even hear an upset Danny stomp downstairs and slam the front door.

“You have any idea where he might go?” the officer asked Robyn and Marcel.

“Who can guess? Danny prefers to stay inside,” he said. “The house—shouldn’t someone be there?”

“Does he even know how to find his way back?” Luc asked.

“Folks, has he ever driven a car before?”

“I mean, he drives the mower,” Robyn said. “And I’ve let him steer around an empty school lot.”

“So it’s reasonable to think the boy can at least manage a vehicle.”

“Reasonable to think?” Marcel said. “What does it matter?”

“Isn’t it obvious he’s driven away?” Robyn asked.

“Or someone took him, ma’am.”

In the sudden silence, Mr. Sokol clapped his hands and jogged inside.

“I hadn’t—” Marcel said, and then cursed.

The officer stepped back in the direction of the cruiser to issue a call to the other units. He returned to pass out their card.

“There’s no way he’d make it to a highway,” Robyn said, barely glancing at it. She’d expected them to organize this sudden chaos, not increase it.

“We’ll patrol outward. Two other cars are headed this direction. I think we’ll know soon enough.”

“Tell them not to flash the sirens,” she called out after them. “If he thinks he’s in trouble, he’ll panic!”

They waved and the black vehicle left with a discrete *blip* of alarm. Mr. Sokol returned with mugs of coffee, which he first handed to Robyn and Marcel.

“Especially for you two,” he said.

Robyn poured hers onto the ground after breathing in the rum fumes. She walked to the edges of the front yard, peering along the side of the house. She heard Marcel complain, “Those fuckers,” before asking everyone to help however they most felt comfortable. The night was growing quieter, colder, more intense. A skunky scent near the front of the house made her sniffle and scrunch her nose. It felt good to return to Marcel, put her arm around his hip, smell the coffee and liquor on his breath. Mr. Sokol was the first to volunteer, promising he and his wife would stay “at their domicile” in case Danny returned. On Luc’s suggestion, his three friends would drive out to the nearby fast food restaurants, which was usually heresy under Robyn’s roof. She realized what she’d smelled was marijuana. As she set her judgments aside, the idea struck her: “The park,” she said. “That’s where he is.”

She and Danny drove to the park a few times every month. Marcel often stayed home to read and Luc refused be seen with family by choice. Robyn had hoped that nature could be a sanctuary, a place where his differences were left unrecognized. While she did her best to slow Danny along the trail, train his ears for birdsongs, he preferred acquisition to identification. He ripped thin branches or handfuls of leaves and asked the scientific names. He didn’t want to listen for the birds, he said, because he liked to hear her talk instead.

Marcel touched her shoulder. “That can be our starting point.”

“But someone needs to be home,” Robyn said. “Just drop me at the park.”

“I can search with mom,” Luc said. “It’s my fault.”

“Into the car,” Robyn said, although she said, her mind set on searching alone.

They crept along the development roads, their heads turning at every car parked crookedly or far from the curb. Marcel waited at stop signs for an extra beat. A cop turned left through the headlight beams, headed the opposite way, and everyone seemed to wait for someone else to deliver some small insult or hope. They refocused their eyes into the darkness.

The county park entrance was blocked by a pivoting metal gate but a person could slip through the wooden farm fence along the perimeter. They drove up and down Oaks Road; the Volvo wasn't there.

"Can you pull over," Robyn asked when they returned to the entrance. The main lot where the trailheads diverged was inscrutable, the road too long and arced with trees.

"There's nothing out there," Marcel said.

She unbuckled her seatbelt.

"He's here. I can sense it."

"There's no car."

"Mom—"

She grabbed Marcel's hand once and then hopped to the pavement.

"Trust me. I'll call you guys soon."

When the backdoor slid open, she ordered Luc to stay.

"I was just moving to the front, mom," he said, his voice strangely pacifying.

There were so few streetlights at this end of town, Marcel noticed, maintaining the same cautious pace as during the drive out to the park. His eyes hurt from refusing to

blink. A car passed and he didn't bother flicking off the hi-beams. Emergency trumped courtesy.

"Mom'll be alright. Right?"

Marcel looked for a moment at his son, face turned from the open window, the same precocious beard Marcel boasted as a teenager except on his mother's long head—a classically handsome mixture, he always thought.

"You know your mother. She reaches a conclusion, and she can't let it go. For good or bad."

He expected his son's head to return to the rushing air, which he wanted, actually. It gave him the freedom to think and worry about his actions without being reminded of the trickle-down. Was it a mistake to leave his desperate wife—the boys' mother—in a park, knowing this was exactly what she wanted but also that she would be sprinting through the domain of who knew what types of nocturnal or pulchritudinous life? Was it? Even if there were bears or drifters out there, he wouldn't bow to pragmatism. This was what she thought she earnestly needed, and he had to accept those needs.

"Stupid hippies," Luc said, smacking the dash. "If they weren't getting toasted in the living room, they would've realized Danny had gone."

Marcel asked if he was talking about his friends.

"The Sokols. They're always getting high and trying to give us some. We have to literally hide in Jimi's room."

"Don't get distracted," he said, though Marcel thought this explained why Mrs. Sokol had seemed frozen throughout the ordeal. "They're not to blame. Your mother

shouldn't have allowed you and your brother—wherever he is—to their house. And where was I? Having a beer.”

He adjusted the rearview out of agitation.

Better concentrating on the road, he saw a figure walking along the shoulder. He slowed, as if he'd scare it. “Do you see that up ahead?” he asked.

“What?” Luc asked, sticking his head out.

“This person.”

“What person?”

A hunched figure walked along the residential roadside in dark sweats and sneakers, the wincing reflectors on the heel the only shiny indicator. No neon safety vest, no flashers. Marcel grabbed his son's elbow and pointed under the windshield.

“Shit, now I see him.”

“Was Danny wearing anything like that?”

“Uh,” Luc said. “No. Danny was wearing his yellow jacket.”

Marcel tapped the horn, to show his discretion. A man turned, a middle-aged face, sweat rolling down the shaved jawline and double chin. Marcel parked, kept the hi-beams on, and told Luc to move behind the wheel.

“You think he's seen Danny?”

“I have some ideas.”

Marcel slammed the door behind him and called, “Good night.” He knew this was an incorrect translation and he thought it made him sound more harmless. “We need some help, sir. You see a boy on your walk tonight?”

“You got a boy out walking at this hour?”

Marcel met the stranger at the edge of the vector of headlights, their shins illuminated. To see Luc through the blinding lights was impossible. Familiar splotches circled when he blinked. He wondered how late it was.

“I don’t think you understand. It’s my son, he’s not well.”

The man looked thoughtfully down at the gravel. “Haven’t seen anything. I’ll keep my eyes open, though. Your family lives close?”

“Only one-half mile. Brookside Street.”

Marcel pointed across their bodies so the stranger turned to follow.

“Yeah, I walk Brookside,” the man said, and while he remained looking into the distance, Marcel took the man’s left arm and curled it behind his back. He directed him to the hood of the car. The horn honked, then stayed pressed down as if it were the brake pedal.

“Did you see him? Did you do anything?”

Marcel didn’t ratchet the man’s arm further but didn’t release.

“I’m out every night, the same loop,” he said. “Relax.”

Luc came out and shouted down Marcel’s questioning. “Let him go, dad!” When Marcel asked if he liked little boys, he felt his son’s arm grab around his neck. He released the stranger; Luc’s legs had hooked around his midsection, and Marcel staggered onto the gravel shoulder. Realizing the boy’s commitment to the chokehold, Marcel threw himself backward onto the ground. Luc cursed. They rolled apart. Marcel came to standing on the driver’s side of the hi-beams, staring at his son on the other side, rubbing the back of his head. The night-walker had fled through the yards.

“I think I have glass in my head,” Luc called over the idling engine.

The vitriol Marcel wished to reply with (“Good”) ultimately subsided. He said, “We have to get home anyway.”

As he sat with Luc in the dark living room, there was nothing Marcel wanted to do more than move. Movement. To grab Luc and drag him to...where? To teach him what cannot be taught but for the passing of time.

He remained sitting, watching his almost adult son nurse a bag of ice against his injured head. Sitting and reminding himself this was the only possibility: to wait. They neither slept nor talked but sat until the front door creaked open.

Robyn found the darkness made her memory slippery. Did they turn at this juncture or further up the hill? The wilderness trails were crossed by enough maintenance paths and the markers overgrown that even in daytime a person could get confused—though never completely lost. To keep warm, she had started jogging, which only amplified her anxiety. She took turns trying for the most circuitous uphill route; Danny could be anywhere here.

The murmur through the trees, the steadiness of the wind was inescapable. Fork after fork, she was haunted by the sense that a storm was coming: somewhere she heard a faint echo of windchimes—from her childhood perhaps, or a classic film—along with the trembling limbs and leaves. Bushes and scrub trees grew denser, the darkness heavier. She knew she was close to the steepest part of the hill. A branch cracked around the turn ahead. It had come from the ground—not above—and too resoundingly to be a squirrel or rabbit. She started to chase. Around the corner, she saw nothing but an empty trail. The rustling footsteps of the runner must have veered off the long, beaten path ahead. She

called Danny's name. She called again, parsing wisps of trees. The terrain quickly inclined underfoot, and Robyn tripped, cracked her knee on a rock. She pushed herself to standing. She listened, unmoving, for a sound. The wind had calmed and she heard the movement of something more substantial above. Was he climbing?

When she found a tree she could scale, she stopped. Her heart had never beat this fast. She spat—another first—and untacked the saliva from her lips with her fingers. It validated an instinct in her. She listened—there was nothing. My son would not have come here, she realized. No matter how much she wanted him to.

She checked her pockets and found them empty, phone lost. The pain in her knee and exhaustion kept at a distance now broke over her. She'd be walking home, she guessed, and she would get the good or bad news there. She returned to the trail and ducking the fence she said, "What a stable person you've turned out to be: home one night, trespassing a park another."

The sun peeked behind the development houses, two or three-story brick hulks. It seemed to her now that these houses were built bigger to accommodate for unhappiness. Darkened guest rooms, doors that stayed shut all day long. In a couple of months, Luc would be away at college. The house would only get bigger. The possibility of Danny never returning, of her alone with Marcel, made Robyn shiver. No house could be big enough in that case.

She stopped and leaned against a mailbox. She was being delusional: everything would be okay.

A few curtained windows lit up. The sky was still too grey for her own alarm to beep, but the shrouded forms starting to rise were undoubtedly her colleagues, possibly

even her customers. Some groggy patrons complained about the early hour. She didn't understand them. Dawn was the most exciting time of her day; as it progressed, you just got more and more tired.

Robyn shivered again and walked faster.

More than a year later, they're at the same kitchen table, same kitchen. Presents and envelopes flank the bakery-made cake, the smallest size possible. Robyn takes pictures of Danny with her camera to post online for Luc, whose second semester is in merciless full-swing. He cloisters just like Marcel.

"Which one will be the first?" Marcel asks Danny. It's his sixteenth birthday, and the only thing he asked for was a trip to the DMV. They warned him that it's not happening this year. They've preached self-control, hoping this will curb his efforts to prove he can drive.

But Danny still holds each box and card to the light, convinced the colorful packaging and lectures have all been a hoax. Who can blame him, Robyn thinks.

He shakes a gift whose contents she can't remember. He sniffs around the bow. "I knew it," he says and grins. She wants him to be right. She wants a surprise. Rip it open, kiddo. See what's inside.

Mind Assured, Inc.

What if I told you there are these little things in your brain called mirror neurons, and because of these mirror neurons, it's possible for you and me to share the same state of being? For example, if you watch me smoking a cigarette, part of your brain lights up as if *you* were smoking that cigarette. Other than the neural activity caused by somatosensory reactions—your lungs and throat don't feel that pinch of inhalation—my brain and yours are firing identically. You might even get a phantom rush of nicotine.

My excitement was so great upon reading the pioneering research that it spurred me into a PhD program. Over the past five years, I'd been investigating more precise methods of imaging the phenomenon (they don't let you simply split open a human skull), studying a possible connection between empathy and mirror neurons, alongside a PhD student in sociology, Bradford. However, after so many trials, retrials, and inconclusive results, the sparkle of the fMRIs faded. I began lamenting our stupid faith, sitting in Bradford's office, the floor stained pink where the boxed-wine spigot hung off the desk. He listened and preached "process." Some nights he tried persuading me to go out to his humanities friends' gatherings. But suddenly in that sixth year, the final year of funding, my process shifted.

This was around the time when New York City went Eastern—Far Eastern—and supposed Midtown gurus or Wall Street siddhas started appearing, *namaste*-ing out of the woodwork. Anyone who could teach downward dog or dragon's breath could be installed

in any office or corporate campus as a “Well-being Analyst” and earn benefits to boot. Seemingly overnight, the business caj could be seen on the subway, one hand toting a yoga mat while the other held a smartphone showing TED Talks given by flashy doctors. It was during these mornings on the L that Mind Assured, Inc., was conceived. After enough commutes, with the wheels turning in my head, I could almost feel the money filling my pockets. Or maybe my middle fingers lifting.

The day the business cards arrived, I pitched the idea to Bradford, saying, “For once, we’re the gatekeepers.” The shtick I’d developed consisted of us standing inside the Flatiron Building to offer our printed message and *Anjali mudras* to the lobby traffic. In order to raise visibility, we were going to wear poppy-colored *kesas* ordered off Amazon. We’d ditch our watches, wallets, and phones in my Toyota. No shoes, satchels, pens, or papers. What I figured would really sell us was the transparent gleam of devotion—not only across our shaved faces but emanating from our shaved and polished craniums as well. The getup professed that in this Wild West of enlightenment, Mind Assured could validate just how enlightened these people were.

Bradford cracked up. He held the flimsy card up to the fluorescent light. At the top was the company mantra: *Ensuring your company’s minds are in good hands*. Just below it, I’d included: *Free consultations*. He thought it was a grand joke—a satirical company. Wasn’t that just what this city, what this economy, what the whole Internet deserved.

After we’d performed for just a few hours, our hairless mugs were being photographed with marketing divisions and plastered over social media. The positive

feedback was so strong and so fast that one manager came down to the main lobby and asked if we were real.

“Do we look real?” I asked.

He took us up on the business card’s offer and ushered us into the elevator. Bradford, standing behind the manager, nudged me as the doors slid shut. The eyes in his bare head bulged as if to say, “What did we get ourselves into?” I put my finger to my lips. Meanwhile, the manager prattled on about their “Mind-Body Coordinator,” Tobias, whose morning and midday ecstatic dance classes were experiencing record lows in attendance; productivity had regressed to pre-ecstatic levels. A few employees were already gathered near the elevator, tipped off by text messages, and they took our pictures as we came through the glass doors and shuffled past the cubicles toward one of the corner offices.

“Smile and be perfectly still,” I mumbled to Bradford.

We entered the office, and shutting the door behind us, the manager gestured toward two leather seats.

“We prefer the floor,” I said before Bradford could sit. With our legs folded on the cold carpet, the manager admitted it was awkward to conduct this conversation behind his desk and rested on his knees next to us.

“So explain to me what your process is like,” he said. “What type of data do you need? Who do you need to talk to? What’s the timeline?”

Bradford turned to me; the manager took his cue and blinked, waiting. I’d imagined this very same exchange during the commutes when I’d dreamt up Mind Assured.

“We sit down with the Subject and simply talk. A conversation is the best way to ascertain if he or she is highly calibrated or not.”

“But you can’t make that call in a vacuum. You need to understand the culture and personalities in our office. How we do business,” he said.

“It’s our belief that the enlightened will positively impact any environment. And that’s our specialty: to measure this.”

“To put it in your language,” Bradford said, “a LeBron James’ll win on any team.”

“Or,” I added, “a Warren Buffett. We can tell you if you have this or not.”

“Okay, but how can you do that?”

In that moment, I could’ve said a lot of intelligent things. I could have related some theory from my years of graduate study, discussing how different states of activity or inactivity produce different frequencies in the brain. Active thought or normal motor function creates higher-frequency beta waves, but when this coincides with deep meditation’s slowly oscillating theta waves, something like Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” or what Maslow called “peak experience” can be attained. Think about a highly skilled musician getting lost in a performance or even someone like the old owner of a delicatessen who’s been slicing hunks of swiss and pastrami for thirty years, slapping them on sandwiches without a glance, chatting overtop the glass display case to strangers.

Instead I told the manager, “The how is something we cannot elucidate.”

“Proprietary,” he said to himself. He asked what type of references we had.

“References?” Bradford repeated.

I swooped in and explained that his company had the serendipitous chance to be a trailblazer. “We ask not for your trust, but your faith.”

The manager put his hands on his thighs and leaned closer to the undynamic duo of Mind Assured. People had been milling outside the door, only reluctantly returning to their work. The sound of their excitement was clearer now.

“Just tell me what you need,” he said, leaning all the way in.

Bradford and I agreed to return the next day. That night, however, I outlined how we’d proceed in order to make this work: he and I would glide toward the conference room already reserved for us; we wouldn’t mention “late” or “early,” because such concepts contradicted our timepieceless existence (though we would report the silly construct on client invoices); perhaps, if the mood struck, one of us could stop abruptly to honor the splendor of a beige ceiling tile. We would close ourselves in with whomever it was our job to authenticate, seated across from our Subject, again eschewing the wheeled chairs for the thin carpet. My role would be to stare stone-facedly until the end, whereas Bradford would inhale noticeably and begin, “We are very honored to meet you. How are you feeling this day?” From there he’d embark upon a line of questioning about the Subject’s spiritual training and work at the client’s facilities, then topics such as childhood pets, how many minutes, on average, showering required, chewing gum preference, et cetera.

That morning, we vigorously massaged our faces, shaved our heads, and went to work. Tobias had been waiting in the swivel chair and had to awkwardly rearrange himself to sit on our level. He was a loathsome idol of vegan-ish lifestyle and boutique

fashion, such that I could smell the kombucha on his breath from the short distance that separated us. As Bradford slowly prodded, Tobias's tapered pant leg shook and his minimalist shoe joggled, and in the face of this, Mind Assured remained unmoving. He tried joking about the photos of us on Instagram, but we only nodded.

"You guys Brooklynites?" he interrupted at one point.

"We are humans," I said, breaking my silence.

After what must have been two hours, he demanded to know what all of this was amounting to. Having secured his frustration, we bowed to him; our conversation was completed. What did we accomplish by aggravating our Subject? Probably nothing. No one was going to doubt a monk, but I found Bradford's routine perversely entertaining.

We abstained from exiting the conference room while absorbed in "group contemplation." Only after lunch did we allow the manager to enter, once Bradford was bored and couldn't nap any longer.

My partner thanked the manager for his time, gave praise for his kindness and obvious professionalism in letting us do our unorthodox work; I'd even convinced Bradford to say that our work was often misunderstood but the manager was clearly special in his belief. Bradford bowed. I let a silence settle before uttering my final declaration: "Allow Tobias to go."

The manager was disappointed, not by our decision but by the glaring vacancy of the "Mind-Body Coordinator" position.

"Who do you approve of?" he asked.

For this question, I hadn't planned a response. Mind Assured had no suggestions yet.

“Then we’ll bring you back once we’ve lined up a few candidates,” the manager said. Rising, he started to offer his hand, then changed his mind and bowed. I bowed, and Bradford followed automatically. Exiting the conference room, we were besieged and had to bow our way out of the office—fending off one person at a time—and into the elevator.

“This doesn’t feel right,” Bradford said, tugging at his *kesa*. “It’s not me.”

“It’s still you, just a little less hair.”

A messenger with her bicycle squeezed in with us.

“I don’t like it,” Bradford whispered.

“You will when a six-thousand-dollar check comes in the mail.”

She looked over her shoulder, and I shut up. When the doors opened to the ground floor, she looked at me and said, “For that much cash, I’ll join the order.”

We disrobed in the privacy of my Toyota and went out for a martini we could now afford. We didn’t remove our overlarge sunglasses until seated at a corner booth.

“I want to help people,” Bradford said. “Not manipulate them.”

“You saw how happy everyone in the office was to see us.”

“We just told that manager to fire a perfectly fine man, and he’s going to do it.”

“We told him to fire a dude from a position that shouldn’t even exist. Which, if you recall, is exactly the point of Mind Assured.”

Bradford started to bend down toward his full martini glass but sat up. “I agreed to the humorous theory of Mind Assured, not Mind Assured as an actual functioning company. And I only did that because I thought it was giving you a much-needed break from the research.”

“Well, maybe we’re discovering that Mind Assured actually holds more future value than that pseudoscience.”

His eyebrows lifted.

“Bradford, I’m not saying you’re a bad sociologist, but you’re damn good as my coworker.”

Bradford did his best not to call me a fool for believing I should abandon the degree, explaining that a lot of people go through these phases of doubt. But when he saw my arms folded, he changed his tune. It wasn’t as if he could go down to the 7-Eleven and pick up another PhD candidate to partner with. Not at this advanced stage. He asked if I understood where he was coming from.

“Listen, if you keep doing Mind Assured with me,” I said, “we’ll take that money to pay for school, and I’ll stick with it until we graduate.”

“But I don’t like firing everyone,” Bradford hissed after taking a long sip.

“But if we want people to understand how ridiculous everything has become, this is the only path.”

So in the following few months, that’s what we did. I went through the motions at the lab, and Bradford performed his gentle but enervating interrogation of the various New Agers. In some ways, we were exactly like superheroes, hiding ourselves in public with hats or hoods (or in my case, a fairly expensive toupee). The company’s popularity spread via social media, and our new clients, the types more invested in medical marijuana than pork bellies, were equally impressed and delighted by our presence.

That is, until my cell phone—Mind Assured’s cell phone—rang, and the assistant of a Fortune 500 CFO spoke on the other line, requesting a lunch with us. In the atrium of the Plaza, we met face-to-face with the CFO. She’d barely swept her skirt under herself to sit before explaining the situation. Management had just announced their “ethics-based” strategic shift—supply chain this, eco-friendly face-lift that. The short of the matter was that the senior executives, who weren’t unhappy with the shift itself, were inclined to believe the CEO had gone too far in his installing of someone called “Gumi” as resident wise man and leader of all interoffice spiritualia. While they knew the CEO had “studied” under Gumi during a three-week vacation in the eastern European highlands, where he’d ingested substances filthy rich in alkalis or psilocybin, which left a man feeling like a million (or in this case, a billion) dollars, but above all *highly* suggestible, and despite the fact that Gumi’s serene presence *had* demonstrated a positive impact, they didn’t like this new position being created without their consultation, outside the conventional hiring/firing hierarchy.

She hadn’t been looking at either Bradford or me, but now she refocused on us. She said they hadn’t been able to ascertain what—if anything—our outfit did, but that didn’t matter. All she needed was for us to (a) enter their offices with the typical fanfare that accompanied our prior appearances, (b) talk to the so-called Gumi, and (c) place in her hands a written statement recommending his termination. At the end of the day, Mind Assured would be justly compensated for this proof, and then some.

Throughout her explanation, a forkful of jerk chicken waited in front of her lips, and this strong desire came over me to say, *Take it, bite it—what are you waiting for?* When she was finished talking and it seemed inevitable she would put the forkful in her

mouth, she excused herself so we could talk things over. The chicken was left sitting there. It took everything I had not to snatch the silverware and eat the meat myself.

“This is where I get off,” Bradford said.

I told him that he was being ridiculous. We only needed to see this one job through, and with the money we would earn, we could easily take our own three-week vacations. We’d both forgotten what that word really meant.

“It’s one thing when a company actually believes in the service we’re providing, but she just wants to use us,” he complained.

“Stop acting like there was any dignity in this. I mean, look at us.”

“What are you talking about? We’re dressed like paragons of fucking dignity.”

I tried complimenting Bradford on his interrogating prowess. I threatened him, even begged. But he was resolute. It was what would make him worthy of that PhD. Only after we bowed away the CFO did he and I come to an agreement.

“Last time,” I told him. “Then you’re free.”

My fellow egghead said, “I want this to be your last time, too.”

“After this, we’re both done. Monk’s honor.”

Before our meeting with Gumi, two execs paraded us through some of the rank and file. We climbed from the fifty-first to the fifty-third floor, and although the company occupied ten more floors above us, Gumi had selected one of the lower conference rooms to work from. Either way, it was a floor I’d never imagined my life would take me to.

In the hall, lamps powered by algae were set like torches jutting out from the walls. The conference room’s décor was equally as lush; violet-flowering vines hung

down from a series of trellises, and where a round table would've been placed, Gumi sat among the tendrils, hunched forward on a bed of velour cushions. He was gangly, stick limbed, but through his plain T-shirt protruded a belly common among both holy men and those who drank an excess of light beer.

I glanced at Bradford. He raised an eyebrow.

"Gumi," he said.

But Gumi's chest just rose and sank.

Bradford, whispering, asked whether he should nudge him.

"Let us not disturb the man," I pronounced in an artificially deep voice. "Who are we to interrupt meditation?"

In the silence that came after, I anticipated what might happen once Gumi did regain consciousness. Probably he'd apologize. I formulated a canned statement that might pass as sage, then a few others in the case of his surprise or confusion.

Soon enough, a snore became a cough, and Gumi opened his eyes.

"Gentlemans," he said, straightening his back. "I hope you no wait lot time. I was in state of trance."

"Waiting is itself a journey," I said.

This made Gumi laugh, a laugh that sounded more weasel-like than human. It was actually kind of beautiful in its ugliness and its carelessness.

"That is good phrase," he said. "Can I use?"

I nodded. Bradford, taking the first step, asked how Gumi was feeling, to which he replied, "Like tooth of bear."

"I have never heard that one before. Can you explain?"

Gumi roared. Then he was laughing like a weasel again. I watched him tip back onto the pillows and hold his chest in spasmodic delight.

Let me say this about laughter: it's an especially complicated process requiring the right and left hemispheres of the cerebral cortex, frontal lobe, and occipital lobe to recognize, synthesize, and analyze even the *possibility* of something humorous before the seemingly spontaneous motor function of laughter occurs (not to mention the million things we must tune out that might detract from our enjoyment). Even if you can't conceptualize the complexity, you know a laugh is—for lack of a more precise term—something special. And never in my life had I witnessed a person laugh so fully. Consumed, I might say. I couldn't help but smile, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Bradford grinning like a dullard. I think we both would've loved to see what was happening in that man's brain.

"Quite an accent, Gumi—is it Mr. Gumi?" I asked in order to snap the spell.

"Gumi," he said.

I asked him if he knew why we were talking with him today.

"Investigation," Gumi said.

"Conversation," I corrected him.

"Investigation."

Bradford kept fidgeting, and I rotated my neck gradually and stopped him with the coldest and most serene smile I could deliver. I turned again to Gumi, and it started to feel a little like the final gunfight in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, with the characters in the deadly three-way in the Spanish cemetery played by Gumi, Bradford, and me.

Here, though, the intrigue wasn't whose muscles could twitch the fastest but who could hold off from twitching at all.

Bradford asked one of his standard questions about short-, intermediate-, and long-term goals, but Gumi pointed to the flowers surrounding us. "Goals? They no have," he said. "Why for me?"

When Bradford, regaining his stride, asked where Gumi saw himself in five years, the man just belched. Bradford continued questioning, but because Gumi seemed to avoid logical answers, Bradford began saying individual words—"Song," "Cat," "Airplane"—and letting the man free-associate in his broken English interspersed with sound effects. Gumi's composure was impeccable, almost to the point of paralysis. The muscles around his lips and jaw so slack he seemed either murderous or transcendent. We were charmed and confused simultaneously. Hypnotized, in other words. I didn't realize the room was silent until Bradford elbowed me.

"Anything to add?" he asked, already rising.

"No."

Bradford approached Gumi to shake his hand. "That went great," he gushed. "It was a real pleasure."

Gumi peered into Bradford's eyes close enough to see his own reflection. Bradford, likewise. To this day, I can only speculate about what happened next, but Gumi suddenly leapt and shouted laughter into my partner's face, gripping his hand. He began kissing Bradford's head like it was the Blarney Stone. Gumi squealed, hopping around, not letting go of him.

Someone knocked on the door. "Is everything okay in there?"

I said everything was fine, but the two men were still attached at the hand. Bradford laughed, too, at first nervously, but then his shoulders relaxed. The trellises overhead shook as the men began to twirl. Their laughter increased, and the doorknob jostled. I pried them apart, Gumi flung his shirt and shorts to the floor, and Bradford threw his *kesa* overhead.

So much for needing to spin this, I thought, watching both men in tighty-whities and hysterics. As soon as the employees outside saw this, they'd take photos (more than enough evidence for the CFO). I could claim Bradford failed to hold up his end of our deal, and Mind Assured could hire a new interrogator and stay in business.

The longer I watched them, though, I got a strange notion that they'd never stop laughing and that everyone about to peer in through the door would join in the laughter because if simply observing an action caused sympathetic reactions in the brain, an earnest attempt at pure laughter would be utterly consuming. The employees would ricochet down the halls; taking their laughter, like a disease, out of the building and return home to infect the ones they loved. It would be bussed from Port Authority, flown out of LaGuardia and JFK.

The lock clicked and the door opened. Gumi jumped to his feet and raised his hands as if to prepare the gathered crowd for a magic trick, which was even more of a riot to Bradford. "Happy greetings," Gumi shouted before directing their attention to me.

A semicircle of employees formed in the room, and heads still peered in from the hall. Some people chuckled, coughed. Photos were snapped, but the phones lowered only slightly; they were waiting to understand how to package and disseminate this moment: Gumi now slowly dancing the cha-cha and Bradford in fits. Mind Assured had to tell

them whether this was a touch of insanity, or whether there was something more powerful at work.

“What you see here,” I said, stepping forward. “Might not look like enlightenment, but exactly for that reason, you should have faith in it.” Gumi started to slow clap, and the crowd followed suit. Eventually we all burst into fierce applause.

Nuevas Palmas, Pennsylvania

They stopped working. Mini-me dropped to his knees on the wet roof and grabbed Sal's wrist. The rain had fallen suddenly, soaking through his shirt and knee-length jorts. The lightning had come even more suddenly, striking Sal, his boss.

Javy hurried over, crouching beside Mini-me. "Putá," he whispered. Just what Sal would've said.

Mini-me's hand moved over Sal's white t-shirt. Unable to feel the heart, he slid his hand underneath. It fluttered and stopped, fluttered again.

"He's alive," Mini-me said.

"Putá," Javy cursed louder. Steam rose from their boss's waist. The top half of Sal's infamous *R* buckle seared his gut. Mini-me and Javy had always made fun of it, as if the 6'2" 245 lb. owner needed distinguishing from the squat, Mexican employees of Ramasco Construction.

The smell of burnt skin choked them both. Mini-me, using the claw of his hammer, unlatched the buckle.

"Do we call the ambulance?" Mini-me asked.

Javy didn't know.

The thud of shingles tossed to the roof made them turn. Tito, stepping from ladder onto roof, let out a whistle. "I thought I smelled something."

The twenty year old was the newest in the long line of young men who'd sojourned from the pueblo of Las Palmas in the Yucatan Peninsula to Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, before returning home, skilled and relatively richer. Everyone came with a different plan, and Tito was six months into his two year stay, a wife and son to return to. Mini-me and Javy were the only ones who'd never left, the first and second Mexican employees Sal ever had. By now, they'd both lived longer here than their birthplace.

"My uncle," Tito said, approaching Sal. "He was struck by lightning twice. The first time, he woke up only a minute after. Felt refreshed. The second time, he didn't wake for a couple weeks."

He crouched and flicked Sal in his flabby cheek.

"I think for him, yeah, somewhere between the two."

"He'll probably wake just in time to show us what we fucked up," Javy said.

"Guys," Mini-me said. "Do we call an ambulance?"

Javy opened his mouth then closed it. Tito waggled the hammer in his belt. They looked at Sal.

"Well?"

Tito, after checking the time on his phone, answered first. "If the ambulance comes, the lady won't let us keep roofing."

"We should get off the roof," Javy argued. He was eyeing the sky. "I mean, Sal's alive, but if one of us gets struck...well, we're not the size of a horse."

Mini-me expected this of Javy, who for all his swearing he'd go back to Las Palmas, wasn't going to abandon his '99 Mustang, girlfriends, and built-to-order breakfast sandwiches.

Mini-me considered the roof, low-pitch and simple enough that they'd torn off and re-shingled the front side in a day. Although the rain was gentle, ominous clouds were building on the horizon.

Tito's hand fell on his shoulder. "If Sal could talk, he'd say 'Muva tu culo.'"

Javy shook his head, no.

But it was Mini-me's decision. He checked again on Sal—the same flutter, the circular burn bad but contained. He took up the nail gun, testing the trigger and the gas-powered generator grunted to work below.

"Muva tu culo," he hollered above it.

It had been late spring of 1987 when David Rodríguez Peña arrived to the town of Kennett Square, soon-to-be mushroom capital of the world, and met Sal Ramasco. While his cousin could get him work in a mushroom house, nineteen year-old David was searching for anything but fungal air. His third afternoon in town, he walked north from the one stoplight. Dull bangings of construction echoed from somewhere nearby; the occasional 18-wheeler accelerated past, the rush enough to make him stumble. He was in awe of the green space and plowed fields, the trees everywhere in between. Nothing like arid Las Palmas, barely a palm to be found. Even the stench of manure, permeating as sunlight, he could get used to.

"Hey, chico," a voice shouted to his right. "You wanna work? Trabajo? Necesito persona hoy."

David didn't understand the next few sentences, but hearing the butchered Spanish was a pleasure. No one speaks it, the people of Las Palmas had sworn. David

blinked up at the stout figure in tar-stained jeans and a radiant white tee. The impression he was struck with, the sun rising in the background, was of a man both rebellious and stylish, like the American surfer or the cowboy, and yet here was a new icon: the roofer. David jogged to the ladder to accept.

All he needed to do that first day was heft bundles of shingles and climb to the roof, then sling shingle after shingle for Sal to nail. While he wobbled under forty-pound bundles and flailed violently at bees, no mistake could be made: David could walk a roof—without hesitation or indication that there was an edge to fall over—even in his peeling sneakers. Sal would never say as much, only watch with lips pursed. No matter how plumb, straight-cut, or well-sealed, silence was praise, David learned over time.

During lunch, a discolored pick-up halted in front of the house, half parked on gravel and yard. A young man slammed the door behind.

“Where’d you pick this scab from?” he shouted, striding toward the pair sitting on the front stoop.

“Aquí,” Sal said under his breath to David, who had already tensed in fear. Sal pointed again until David acknowledged.

Sal, shouting back, met the bearded stranger in the middle of the yard. Their fists dangled beside their hips while arguing. Then the man grabbed Sal’s shirt, and Sal landed a right cross to the man’s chin and wrestled him down, pinning him and laughing.

Once the man had stumbled in retreat and driven off, Sal rejoined David. “Mucho cerveza para el hombre. Te gusta cerveza?”

David shook his head, thinking it the most mis-interpretable response.

“Bueno,” Sal said. He took back the hoagie and, inspecting how much David had eaten, finished the sandwich without stopping for breath between bites.

That evening, David found himself at the automatic doors of Ames with money for a belt, tools, and proper attire. Sal’d fronted him the cash and dropped him off, failing to mention what time in the morning to appear. David selected a hammer, belt, and tape measure; he matched the color of Sal’s worn boots to his new pair, picked the same white shirts that Sal bleached religiously. The cashier handed David a ten dollar bill and coins along with his items. In the two plastic bags was everything he needed to roof, and he could still almost get a skateboard with what remained.

The next day, he arrived at the house just after sunrise but was waiting for an hour before Sal pulled into the driveway. David could see that gargoyle of a man peering at him through the cloud of dust and dirt kicked up by the truck.

“Mini-me,” Sal shouted through the open window. “Muva mi escalara a la roofa.”

David looked at his own clothes, then saw the ladder secured to the truck’s metal rack. He was elated, understanding Sal exactly. Really, what he’d heard was “Welcome.”

Mini-me watched as Sal welcomed Javy, then a few more from Las Palmas. He got all of them extra water—and himself a beer—from customers on humid days. He’d call one of his ex-wives, a nurse, to administer to them in their kitchens. Since Sal owned apartments around the diversifying town, they were relieved of suspect landlords. As a result, the men didn’t need to learn English if they didn’t want to—just dumb themselves down to Sal’s roofing dialect: “la trucka” for “camioneta”; “muva la puerta aquí” and “muva el boxo ayá”; and most famously his usage of “puta” like grammatical duct tape. It

was all you needed when a drill bit snapped or someone burned out a motor: “Put a la putada puta.”

Most important, Sal drove each new arrival to the outskirts of Philadelphia to buy their forged Social Security cards. With these nine digits they became tax-payers, though still undocumented; Sal could write the necessary checks for FICA and Unemployment thereby covering his ass as employer. These payments would be better than a green card, he told them. Sure, as undocumented, they were filling government coffers they’d never be able to draw from. But that’s why the government would never kick them out, as long as they stayed out of trouble. “Cuando usted trabaja, usted es legal,” he explained.

As the years passed, Sal’s muscle struggled to compete with fat. Rather than clip on the tool belt, he answered calls in the truck or in the shade of a chimney while the guys worked. Hadn’t he earned the right? Mini-me thought so. There were days when Sal pissed him off, but Sal had helped build Kennett Square into what it was today: a community that included a widening web of families from Las Palmas, so that the Ames was now a mixed-use complex with “Se Arrienda” printed underneath “For Rent.” On Sunday mornings Mini-me had the option of extravagant gringo sidewalk brunches or a neighboring panderías. Dining outside, he waved at the honking cars of his friends coming from the new Catholic Church, their teenaged sons and daughters at the wheel with their learners’ permits. To reflect the transformation, Sal had rechristened the town “Nuevas Palmas.”

Sometimes on long drives home, he threatened to retire in Las Palmas. He wanted to bask in his legacy there. He’d be King. His former employees should and would construct a statue of him, he bragged, at the heart of the developing town. Except,

knowing his men, they'd probably quit before finishing the job. It'd be a stone base with plaque; boots, limbs, and torso. But only one-third of a face, smiling.

Mini-me felt sorry for his boss in these moments, and rather than laugh at him like the others, he updated Sal on the lives of his former employees, all meant to deepen his pride.

"De nada," Sal would say, catching whoever's eye in the rearview. "De nada a las putas de Las Palmas."

The men went back to work as Sal, his shirt still pulled from his gut, remained motionless on the roof. Down to three able bodies, the tasks shifted. Mini-me nailed shingles with the lone gun. Javy no longer laid them for Sal, but hammered while Tito supplied them both with full bundles. As always, a row of four shingles was started in the center of the roof, then three in the row above, indented at each row so from ground level a small, stepped pyramid seemed to form. The two men took a side, Mini-me to the left where Sal was splayed. *Pa-pop Pa-pop*—he shot four nails through each shingle while Javy hammered at a slower pace. *Pa-pop Pa-pop*. The figure would expand out and upward until the roof was complete. With each time that Mini-me paced back to the center, he shouted, "Mangera, Tito!" and Tito hurried to free the orange air hose that powered the gun. "Permiso," he said, removing it from under Sal's arm or leg and gathering more slack for Mini-me's ascent.

The men went back and forth until hearing a rumble of thunder. Mini-me stretched his back and checked his phone—almost noon. Javy asked to take lunch. The clouds above had mixed into the colors of half-burned charcoal, but there were only the

upper corners left to shingle and the little specialty caps to be installed on the ridge. Two hours of predictable work: one man shingling, one nailing caps, and the third cleaning up.

“Capas, Tito,” Mini-me called. He handed Javy the gun, not bothering to explain.

“Luncha,” Javy protested. But Mini-me said they’d finish work and worry about food later.

Rain fell harder. In the distance more thunder boomed—the generator momentarily silenced—but there was no flash of lightning to be seen. Wondering where Tito and the caps were, Mini-me turned from the roof and sky. He was startled by a figure in red dotted rain boots and matching hooded jacket standing in the yard—the lady homeowner. She raised an arm to point at Sal. Before he could respond, Tito emerged from under the overhang to meet her.

Pa-pop Pa-pop echoed behind. The generator motor muffled any other sounds on ground level. Mini-me thought to shout something since Tito’s English consisted only of food and curse words, spliced into basic phrases. But he could barely hear himself speak, let alone have the woman understand at a distance. He took a knee while Tito stepped closer and closer to the role of company spokesman.

She circled Sal with her finger, which caused Mini-me to glance back again, hopeful he’d woken up. Tito moved between the lady and the roof, then imitated drinking a row of shooters.

“Idiota,” Mini-me said. He nervously wiped the head of his hammer between his pant legs.

The woman dropped her hood. Slowly, her arm lifted higher and a moment passed before Mini-me realized she was waving hello. He waved back. After she walked through the yard toward the driveway, Tito gave a thumbs-up. Mini-me clapped twice.

“Capas!” he reminded and turned back to the roof.

He saw Javy, standing on the ridge, trying to whip the hose loose of Sal. The shrugs and quarter rolls their boss performed made him seem like an impossibly heavy puppet. His mouth flopped open and close. Mini-me was suddenly dismayed. He thought of the day, maybe five years ago, when Sal had accidentally shot a nail into his mound of quadriceps. A stupid mistake. Sal winced, filling his mouth with his left arm. But then he jiggled his hammer free from his belt, and levered out the one and a quarter inches of it. A board would normally emit a squeak, but this silver nail rose inaudibly, as straight as it had entered, pulp clinging to it. A tied bandana and minute later, *Pa-pop Pa-pop*. Where had that Sal gone?

“Cuidado,” Mini-me shouted just as thunder shook the home. Both men trembled. Javy dropped to the roof and began crabbing toward the ladder.

“Sal?” Mini-me asked, not wanting to leave him so exposed.

Javy shrugged and told him to get his ass down.

For a moment, Mini-me visualized rolling Sal over the edge. Wouldn’t the ground be like a big, wet pillow for him? Knowing better, he dragged a bundle of shingles to the body. He rested one over Sal’s face, the closed eyes; a few shingles up the full length of his legs, overlapping them across his torso. Seeing the granules and dirt caught in the thinning hair, Mini-me folded a shingle overtop like a hat.

“Permiso,” he said.

The rain pelted as he descended the ladder. Tito had been standing in the rain, just watching him. Mini-me gestured him under the safety of the overhang, and a minute later Tito began laughing.

“If Sal wakes up,” he said. “He’ll believe he died and came back as a roof.”

Mini-me glared at Tito and Javy, who was wiping his cellphone with the hem of his shirt. “He’d be proud. I can think of a lot less useful things to be.”

Sheets of water fell from the roof’s edge. Mini-me took out his phone, but Javy seemed to read his mind.

“The radar says we have an hour until the storm passes.”

The generator motor restarted to life, and Mini-me walked over to switch it off. After saying he would see that side of sky for himself, he kept walking.

Standing at the garage doors, he watched the dark, united front of clouds. He checked his phone; Javy wasn’t lying. He squatted and leaned back. The only sound was of nature: of rain puddles sloshed by tires, the occasional divine rumble, a surging creek somewhere. Almost natural enough to pretend no haste was needed, nothing was actually at stake. During heavy rains it was always this way, the détente when they could ignore Sal and respond to texts, enjoy a banana, think about anything not-work. But the final image before descending the ladder flashed into his mind: there, above the camel’s hump of shingles and the boots protruding, the last unfinished strip of roof like Sal’s supposed statue in Las Palmas. He got back to his feet.

Javy and Tito were slumped against the exterior wall, blinking at the falling rain. Mini-me took their tool belts off the AC unit and slung them at their feet.

“Capas,” he said to Tito.

The aluminum rungs were slippery and treacherous, and on the roof Mini-me kept his center of gravity as low as possible. He took the gun, nailed two shingles before the existing pressure died. Tito appeared with the caps and Mini-me sent him shuffling down to restart the generator. The thunder sounded as Tito reappeared at the top of the ladder.

“Javy says it’s too dangerous.”

“I can’t make you work,” Mini-me shouted. “But I can make sure you only get paid a half-day.”

Tito squinted at the sky, then climbed onto the roof. “It’s just a little lightning, right?”

The two, galvanized by a slight panic, by adrenaline that spiked with bursts of light, and by the ritual of shingling, progressed quickly. Also helpful, Mini-me realized, was a shingled-over Sal preventing the hose from catching. In the final spits of the storm, they hand-nailed the last caps. Javy even came to gather loose nails for future use.

Mini-me found himself scrutinizing the near-completed roof closer than usual, resisting pride despite their efficiency. He came to Sal, the last mess on the roof. He removed the shingles from his legs first. He frisbeed them to the ground, a careless move which he atoned for by watching their path and gentle fall. He lifted the one covering Sal’s gut. The skin seemed translucent, purplish. Javy kneeled beside him, and Tito crouched on the opposite side.

“Put a,” Tito said after revealing the blanched cheeks and turkey neck.

Javy took the shingle and tossed it over Sal’s face, but Mini-me slung it away. He felt Sal’s neck, then pressed firmly over the chest and waited. Water streamed and pinged

through the gutters even though the rain had stopped. Slowly, he pulled the shirt smooth over Sal's gut. He'd cared for Sal like you would any vulnerable body. He'd done it exactly like Sal would've.

"Put a," Javy cursed at Tito. "Why didn't you say he might not wake up? That's our paycheck on the roof."

"Don't blame me. You didn't want to do anything."

Javy took out his phone and dialed. "Maybe the medics can shock him back to life."

"He's dead," Mini-me said. But Javy walked away, speaking to the dispatcher in Spanish.

"Are we in trouble for this?" Tito whispered. The hair stood on his neck, his eyes jumping from the body to the horizon, then back to the roof. Mini-me had almost forgotten what desperation looked like. He knew he needed to tell Tito something, and even though he wasn't sure it was true in a world without Sal, he said, "They won't get us in trouble for working."

Tito shook his head slowly, his eyes still darting.

Words were not so useful, Mini-me guessed. He slid his hand into Sal's hip pocket, removed the truck key. He tossed them to Javy, the ambulance now on its way.

"Drive him home," Mini-me said. "Someone needs to stay and explain."

Javy didn't protest. He and Tito started down the roof. When they'd descended the ladder, Mini-me shouted for them to take it along. "Job's not finished if we leave a tool behind."

"But how—"

“The ambulance will get me down.”

The top rungs of the ladder disappeared with a clang of aluminum, and Mini-me watched Javy shoulder the collapsed ladder toward the truck and Tito wheel away the generator, struggling to keep up. They shut the doors and then the engine started impressively. A Mexican driving his truck, Mini-me thought. If that didn't wake Sal, nothing could.

He stretched out beside his boss. The nail pouch and hammer stuck into his side, and he eventually let go his belt.

“I don't even remember your last words.”

Windblown limbs were shrugging off the rain, birds calling. The wail of the siren was approaching. Mini-me touched his boss's closed lips.

“Tell me everything I've done well,” he said to Sal and listened for the endless tribute.